

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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THE SEVEN WHITE BEARS;

OR, THE BAND OF FATE. (A STORY OF RUSSIA.)

By RICHARD R. MONTGOMERY.



They had not proceeded far through the wood, when they reached a sleigh drawn by four black horses, and in which six other white figures appeared. On placing the young lady in the sleigh, her strange conductor assisted the man in.

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NEW YORK, MAY 17, 1905.

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The Seven White Bears

OR,

THE BAND OF FATE.

A STORY OF RUSSIA

By Richard R. Montgomery.

CHAPTER I.

THE BAND OF FATE.

Secret societies have existed, and they will continue to exist, under all tyrannical governments.

Nicolas of Russia, who ruled over that great country more than fifty years ago, was one of the most infamous tyrants recorded in history.

During his reign serfdom prevailed throughout his whole empire, and those who were not slaves in name, from the highest to the lowest, were subject to the most inhuman persecutions at the hands of their cruel ruler and his armed followers.

Great nobles were put to death or sent to the wilds of Siberia for life at the mere beck of the tyrant.

Merchants and traders who offended the tyrant's favorites were seized at the dead of night and secretly put to death or banished to the frozen regions, and their relatives and friends never heard of them afterward.

Fair women and brave young men were also sacrificed at the pleasure of the autocrat or his powerful nobles without committing the slightest offense against the laws of man.

In truth, there was no law in Russia at that time except the will of its ruler and the caprices of his ministers.

Was it any wonder, then, that desperate men and women banded together in secret in order to protect themselves or to avenge their wrongs?

Just previous to the great war in the Crimea, Nicholas of Russia was persecuting his people in a fearful manner, and deep and sullen murmurs could be heard on every side.

Spies and detectives prowled around in all the great cities, and more especially in St. Petersburg, the capital of the nation.

Citizens were arrested every night and lodged in the gloomy prisons, from whence very few came forth except to be led out to death or sent to lifelong exile in the frozen regions of Siberia.

As the tyrant emperor was meditating war against Turkey at the time, it was necessary for him to raise immense sums of money, and woe to the unfortunate noble or merchant who refused or attempted to evade the call thus made on him by the

autocrat. It was night in St. Petersburg, and the cold wintry season had set in.

Two young men, who may have been students, walked along one of the principal streets arm in arm.

They were wrapped up in fur coats and caps so that their faces could not be seen, and they were conversing aloud in careless tones.

On reaching a corner of the street the young men separated, the taller of the two going straight on, as he remarked:

"I will see you at the hotel to-night again, friend."

"I'll not be away more than two hours," replied the other, as he turned down the side street.

The tall young man kept on until he reached a house of respectable appearance, when he ascended the steps and knocked at the door.

A rough-looking man of fifty, who stood as erect as a soldier on duty, opened the door and inquired:

"What do you want, sir?"

"I wish to see Dr. Norgo."

"Are you one of the students?"

"Yes, and I am expected."

"Where do you come from?"

"Moscow, and my name is Volga."

"Then enter, sir, and I will guide you up to the dissecting-room."

As the young student passed into the hallway he noticed that the old servant had lost his left hand, and that an iron hook was attached to the stump of the wrist.

The other young student, who had turned down through a side street, had not proceeded very far when he paused before the open window of a fancy store, as he said to himself:

"I will give my traveling friend time to pass on, as I have yet five minutes to spare."

After looking in at the window for a few minutes, the young man retraced his steps, and then hastened to the door of the house which his late companion had entered.

In answer to his summons the old soldier opened it again, and put the usual inquiries.

The young man answered in a satisfactory manner, as he was also admitted and led upstairs by the one-handed old veteran.

When the last young man entered the doctor's house, a man standing in a deep hallway on the other side of the street, and who was also muffled up in furs, muttered:

"That makes the seventh who entered there to-night, and they are all strangers in the city except one. It is very cold here, but I must keep on the alert, as I scent a conspiracy against the emperor."

The old veteran led the second young man up to the second story of the house, and then knocked five times on a door in rapid succession, and, after pausing some seconds, followed up with two more raps.

The door was instantly opened at the end of the knocking, and a venerable old gentleman received them in an ante-room, saying:

"Who comes now, Peter?"

"It is the seventh, I believe," answered the old veteran, pointing to the young student, "and he comes from Moscow, also, doctor."

The old doctor looked at the young man, who had removed his fur cap, while the old veteran retired, closing the door after him.

"You come from Moscow?" inquired the old doctor.

"Yes, sir."

"Why do you seek me to-night?"

"In order to report on the state of affairs along the river where I live."

"What is the name of that river?"

"The Don."

"Have you suffered from the powers that be?"

"I have suffered, as I have lost my father and my uncle within the last month."

"Did they leave you any means?"

"They left me ample means, all of which is at the disposal of the Band of Fate."

The old doctor nodded his head in approval, and then grasped the young man by the hand, as he remarked:

"I think you will prove a good selection, providing you will stand the tests."

"I am prepared for the trials," answered the young man in earnest tones.

"Then put aside your coat and hat and enter the dissecting-room with me, to be introduced to your associates in the grand work before you."

The young man hung his cap and coat on a rack, on which six other warm garments were hanging.

The old doctor then led him from the ante-room into a very large apartment at the back of the house, in the center of which stood a marble table.

One of the students was bending over the dead body when the seventh of their number entered with the old doctor, and the young man from the Don could notice that he was weeping bitterly.

Before the last comer could notice much more a tall, active young man, wearing a heavy reddish mustache, stole toward him with a pleasant smile on his face, saying in friendly tones:

"And so you are bound for the same destination, my pleasant traveling companion?"

The young man from the Don smiled, as he answered:

"So it seems we are to be brothers in peril."

The old doctor then interposed, saying:

"It is well that you know each other already, but I will now introduce you in due form. Brother Volga, this young gentleman is from the River Don, and by that name he will be known in the Band of Fate. Brother Don, this tall friend of yours comes from the River Volga, and you will know him hereafter by that title."

The young men clasped hands in the most earnest manner,

pledging themselves to eternal friendship in the dangerous enterprise before them.

The old doctor then led Don to the table and introduced him to the others in turn, all of whom were known in that apartment by the names borne by some of the principal rivers in Russia.

On reaching the young student who was weeping over the dead body, and who brushed the tears from his eyes on the approach of the stranger, the doctor said:

"Sister Duna, this is Brother Don. She is weeping over her father, who was put to death by the tyrant two nights ago."

As the young student pressed the hand of the disguised young girl he looked earnestly into her flashing deep-set eyes, while the old doctor continued in low tones, saying:

"Be not surprised at seeing Sister Duna in male attire and wearing those dark ornaments on her upper lip. The spies of the tyrant have been seeking her for the past two weeks, and she has avoided them by wearing this disguise. When Duna moves out into the street she will put on the eye-glasses also, and the keenest of the autocrat's hunters will not recognize her."

"I live only for vengeance," muttered the disguised girl.

"And for the rescue of your friends and the friends of the bands," said the doctor in impressive tones.

"Yes, yes," answered the young girl with a sigh. "I have friends to rescue from the clutches of the tyrant, and my life will be devoted to them."

"We will come to order now, brothers," cried the old doctor, as he seized a large dissecting knife and took his stand at the head of the table.

The pretended students ranged themselves around in silence while the old doctor continued, saying:

"Brothers of the Band of Fate, you all know why you have been sent here to me. A secret call has been sent throughout the country by the order, of which I am the head here in St. Petersburg.

"In order to baffle the tyrant who rules over Russia at present it has been decided to form select bands for the special purpose of rescuing his victims who are being sent to that desolate region known as Siberia."

"Why not slay the tyrant at once?" grumbled Volga in fierce tones.

The old doctor cast a reproachful glance at the young man and then replied, saying:

"The time has not come for that yet, Brother Volga."

"And why not, father?"

"Because Russia is on the eve of a great war, and we do not propose to aid our foreign enemies by putting the emperor to death at such a crisis. That emperor is a cruel tyrant, yet he is necessary to Russia at present. When the war is over Nicholas will meet his doom. In the meantime we are banded together for the purpose of rescuing our innocent friends who were condemned to eternal exile in Siberia."

The old doctor paused a moment, and Duna sighed again as she said to herself, casting a glance at the face of the dead man at the same time:

"We cannot rescue the dead, but we can avenge them, and I will slay the tyrant when the war is over."

The old doctor continued, saying:

"It has been therefore decided by the secret council to send forth, with each batch of prisoners destined for Siberia, a faithful band composed of not more than seven members."

"You have been selected on the first call, and it will be your duty to start out on or before the morning of the second day hence. You will consult together and select any disguise you may agree upon."

"Who will be our leader?" inquired the young man known as Don, as he cast an approving glance on tall Volga.

The old doctor smiled, and continued:

"You will select as your leader also, as the council has decided certain tests on that point."

"What are the tests?" inquired the disguised maiden, as she brightened up under the influence of the stirring words spoken by the old doctor.

Before continuing his remarks the old doctor waved his hand around the large apartment, and then addressed his young friends, saying:

"You will perceive that this place is fitted up as a gymnasium and a dissecting-room also. Our object is to baffle the spies, should they burst in on us, by pretending that I am giving you instructions in surgery, and you will know how to act on the first alarm. You will seize the knives placed on the table before you, and you will fling aside any weapons you may be using in a trial of skill at the moment."

Murmurs of approval fell from the young men, while tall Volga remarked:

"I hope we will not have to use the knives on the body."

A shudder passed over the disguised girl's frame, and she cried:

"No, no! My dear father's body must not be touched on any account."

"It will not be touched, Brother Duna. Remember, young friends, that our young sister will be known as Brother Duna, as she does not propose to fling aside her disguise until——"

"The death of the tyrant!" exclaimed the young woman in wrathful tones.

"The death of the tyrant," continued the old doctor. "And now for the selection of a leader, brothers."

"What are the tests, father?" demanded one of the young men who had no yet spoken.

"The council has decided that only the bravest, the most active, and the wisest of our members throughout the land are entitled to act in the great work marked out, and I know that you have all been selected in your different localities on that account. The council has also decided that a member of each band excelling in certain tests of skill and wisdom will be the leader of the chosen seven."

"What is the first test, father?" inquired a voice.

"Strength. Move the table aside and we will go on with the trial."

The table moved on smooth-running rollers, and it was pushed into a corner of the large apartment without making the least noise.

The young man who will be known as Don drew close to the disguised girl and cast an earnest glance at her as he said to himself:

"Is it possible that the maiden will enter into the contests with us?"

Duna seemed to understand what was passing in the youth's mind, as she smiled on him in a confident manner, saying in subdued tones:

"I will enter into some of the contests, but I cannot be expected to cope with your big friend in strength."

CHAPTER II.

TRIALS OF STRENGTH AND SKILL.

At a word from the old doctor, all the young people flung aside the students' gowns and hats they were wearing around the dissecting-table, and they then appeared in close-fitting garments such as those worn by athletes when performing in

gymnasiums, only still retaining the dark pantaloons in case of a sudden surprise.

The old doctor then addressed the young folks again, saying:

"It has been decided by the council that I am to be the sole umpire in the contest. I have also the power to reject any person who may not, in my opinion, come up to the standard of what is required in the arduous work before you. Are you all agreed?"

A murmur of approval arose on the instant, and the old doctor continued, saying:

"As strength and endurance is one of the first requirements in your grand mission, we will commence with a wrestling match."

A confident smile passed over Volga's face, and he stretched out his brawny arms to their full length, as he remarked:

"I was the best wrestler on the banks of the Volga."

The young man from the Don, who was scarcely nineteen years of age, and he was of medium height and of delicate mold, remarked:

"Friend, it would be folly for me to engage you in a wrestling match, but as I was brought up in America, I learned to fence and box there."

"Fencing will be in order hereafter," cried the old doctor. "Who will engage Volga in a wrestling match?"

"I will," cried the stalwart young fellow who was called Vistula, as he hailed from the banks of the famous river where the great Napoleon won his first victory in Russia.

The old doctor sprinkled sawdust on the middle of the floor as the two young friends advanced to the friendly encounter with smiling faces.

The contest was soon over, although it was very violent while it lasted, and the champion from the Volga defeated his opponent by hurling him on the floor in two of the three bouts in the trial.

"Who will engage Volga next?" inquired the old doctor, "or must I declare him victor in the first trial?"

None of the other young men appeared anxious to try a bout with the wrestler from the Volga, but Duna stepped up toward him with a smile on her sprightly face as she remarked:

"As I wear a mustache and the clothes of a man, I should be prepared to enter into all manly contests, but I decline a close embrace with such a giant. Yet I believe I am your equal in strength."

The wrestler with red hair bowed to the disguised girl in a gallant manner, and replied, saying:

"You can test your strength with me in any manner you please, Brother Duna."

"Then hold up your hands."

Volga held up his hands, and the young girl sprang forward and seized him around the waist.

A loud murmur of applause burst from the others as they saw the powerful young woman raising the heavy man from the ground, and holding him aloft for a moment or so, as she cried:

"You see that I have strength, and would that I had the tyrant in the same position, so that I could dash him to the ground head foremost."

Another murmur of applause burst from the audience as the young woman lowered the man again, while the old doctor cried out in pleasant tones:

"I think you are fully as strong as Brother Volga, yet I must decide that he is the champion wrestler if you do not engage in a contest with him, Brother Duna."

"I do not know the tricks of the game, and I will not engage, but I will try him in other points."

As none of the others would engage the wrestler from the Volga, the old doctor cried:

"Fencing is the next in order, as all the members of the Band of Fate must be excellent swordsmen."

While thus speaking the old doctor seized one of the swords hanging on the side of the wall, placing a wire mask on his face at the same time also, saying:

"I served in the army, and I know how to use a sword. I will engage you all in turn. Brother Volga, as the victor in the last game, you will fence with me first."

The tall young athlete prepared for the contest, and he soon stood before the old doctor, saying:

"I was chosen as the best fencer in our local society, but I am not a boaster."

"Set on then, and we will see how you fence," said the old doctor, who appeared to be as strong and active as a man of thirty.

Volga was a good swordsman, but he was no match for the skillful old doctor, who disarmed the red-haired youth after a short struggle.

The successful wrestler retired a little mortified, and the old doctor cried out:

"Brother Don will engage me next."

The handsome young fellow who claimed he had received his training in America then took his place before the old doctor, and a brilliant contest ensued.

The skillful old swordsman put forth his best points, warming in the effort as he saw that the active young fellow before him parried all his thrusts with apparent ease.

After fencing about five minutes the old veteran cried:

"You fence remarkably well, Brother Don, and now I request you to set on me."

The young man did set on with great force and vigor, and in less than a minute after the sword went flying from the old doctor's hand up to the ceiling, the young victor catching it with his left hand as it fell.

The generous old veteran stared at his young opponent in amazement for some moments, while a murmur of applause rang through the room, and he then cried:

"That is extraordinary, and I honestly declare that you are the best swordsman I ever encountered, Brother Don. As I am defeated, I now declare that you will fence with the others in turn, and the victor in the contest will be the swordsman who defeats you."

The stalwart young man from the Vistula was the next to engage Brother Don.

A brief but splendid contest ensued, when Brother Vistula's sword went flying to the ceiling also, and he honestly declared himself vanquished.

Volga then encountered the youth from the Don, only to meet with a like defeat.

All the others proved themselves to be excellent swordsmen, but none could compare with the modest youth who claimed that he had received lessons in America.

Having defeated all the young men in the band the young champion of the sword turned to Duna with a smile, saying:

"Did you not learn to fence, Brother Duna?"

A significant smile appeared on the young woman's face as she answered:

"My father was an old soldier, and he taught me how to use the sword, so that I could one day strike against the tyrant. As I aspire one day to lead the Band of Fate I will engage with you."

While thus speaking the young woman sprang for a sword and mask, and she soon confronted Don, as she continued, saying:

"Rest for the time, as you must be weary after defeating so many."

"I am not weary," responded the young fellow, as he advanced to the encounter, "and if you defeat me I will be proud to serve under you."

"The sword play will not decide the contest," interposed the old doctor, "as the leader of this first Band of Fate must prove himself superior in wisdom and courage as well as strength and skill. Set on now, as you have other trials before you, and the spies of the tyrant may assail us at any moment."

Brother Don and the muscular young woman did set on with intense vigor.

Loud murmurs of applause greeted the young woman, as the spectators saw that she more than held her own against the brilliant young swordsman who had defeated them all in turn.

As the young woman forced her opponent back step by step, Volga cried:

"Brother Don is too gallant to put forth his utmost skill against the lady."

Drawing back for a moment or so, the young fellow responded in manly tones, crying:

"On my honor, Brother Volga, I am doing my utmost, I swear to you."

"Set on again," cried the old doctor.

They did set on again with increased vigor, and murmurs of applause continued, as the enthusiastic spectators perceived that the young woman had the best of the bout.

A ringing shout of applause burst forth at last when they saw Don's sword flying from his grasp, while the old doctor cried:

"Order, brothers, or the spies will be on us."

Don bent down before the young woman on one knee, and addressed her in manly tones, saying:

"I am fairly vanquished, and I declare that you are the best swordsman that I ever encountered, Brother Duna."

"You were weary, or the result would have been different," answered the young woman, with a generous smile.

"Brother Duna is declared to be the champion of the sword," announced the old doctor, "and the other contests will now go on."

The other contests consisted in leaping over bars, firing at marks with air pistols, and in races around the large apartment.

Volga bore away the palm in high jumps, the youth from the Don proved to be the fleetest of the seven, while the young woman from the Duna proved to be the crack shot of the band.

All the others acquitted themselves to the perfect satisfaction of the old doctor, who addressed them, saying:

"Draw forth the table again, as we have to decide between two rivals. Brother Volga has proved himself superior in strength and agility, and Brother Duna is the best swordsman and best shot. It now remains to be proved which of you possesses the most wisdom and courage, in order to guide the Band of Fate on its glorious mission."

At that moment a bell rang in the corner of the room, and the old doctor exclaimed in excited tones:

"That is a warning from Peter that the spies are on us, and——"

Before the venerable old man could complete the sentence the one-handed old veteran rushed into the room crying:

"The soldiers of the emperor have forced in the door, and they are coming this way. The house is surrounded on all sides, good doctor."

Each of the young folks had resumed their cloaks and hats, and they were standing around the dissecting table at the moment, as it had been drawn out into the center of the apartment again.

The old one-sided veteran had scarcely concluded the announcement when the tramp of heavy feet were heard in the

ante-room, and then into the main apartment marched a dozen Russian soldiers with a young officer at their head.

Ordering his men to take aim at the pretended students and the old doctor, the young officer cried, in fierce tones:

"I arrest you all in the name of the emperor. Down on your knees and surrender, or my men will slaughter you like so many wolves."

Four or five of the young conspirators drew pistols from under their garbs on the instant and presented them at the soldiers, Volga crying:

"Fight to the death, as it is better——"

"Hold, hold, friend," cried Brother Duna, as the young woman sprang out before the others and fell on her knees before the young officer. "We are peaceable citizens, officer. We are students under instruction with good Dr. Norgo here, and why should we be arrested when we have not committed any crimes?"

The old doctor turned a frowning face on those who had drawn their weapons, and cried:

"Brother Volga, you are strong and active, but you do not possess wisdom enough, or presence of mind either, to lead the Band of Fate. Retire, friends, and the last test is over."

The young officer bowed to the old doctor and then led his men out of the room.

The young woman sprang to her feet and confronted the doctor, saying:

"What is the meaning of this, father?"

"It means, Brother Duna, that I appoint you as leader of the first Band of Fate. Brother Volga is your superior in strength and activity, but you are his superior by far in true courage and self-possession. These soldiers are members of our society here in St. Petersburg, and they appeared thus disguised here now in order to test you all."

Volga advanced on the instant and knelt before the young woman as he said:

"I admit, Brother Duna, that you are my superior in skill and wisdom, and I will obey you implicitly to the death hereafter."

All the others knelt in turn before the brave young woman, while the old doctor said:

"Brothers of the Band of Fate, Brother Duna is now your leader, and you will obey him hereafter in the glorious work you are to do."

"We will obey!" cried one and all.

"Then I will retire," said the old doctor, "and you can now settle among yourselves as to your disguises and the mode of travel during the expedition."

"We will leave it all to Brother Duna," responded the youth from the Don.

"We will leave it all to Brother Duna," said the others in chorus, and the wrestler from the Volga was the most enthusiastic in favor of their chosen leader.

CHAPTER III.

BOUND FOR SIBERIA.

On the following night seven young students left St. Petersburg in a large sleigh drawn by four black horses.

Through the influence of an official who was in high favor with the emperor the young men had received passes giving them permission to proceed to the Ural Mountains on a hunting expedition for wolves and bears.

Two of the young students got out at the first halting place and took charge of four other splendid black steeds awaiting them there.

The sleigh then proceeded on its way, and the two young men

followed on horseback, each of them leading a black steed on the journey.

At the next stopping place, which was a large village, the young hunters received two large trunks, one of which contained ample provisions for the expedition, and the other was filled with the best arms and ammunition then in use.

On the morning after the young students left the city a large batch of prisoners emerged from one of the leading prisons on their way to Siberia.

The prisoners were conveyed in large, rough sleighs, into which they were huddled like so many cattle, and they were guarded along the route by fifty mounted soldiers, under the command of a certain Captain Orloff.

Captain Orloff was the illegitimate son of a Russian noble who was in great favor with the emperor.

He was a tall, handsome young fellow, but he was cruel and passionate, as well as cunning and treacherous when his evil passions were aroused.

Among the hundred prisoners thus borne along to life-long misery were old men and women who had not many years to live, stalwart husbands and wives in the prime of life and youths and maidens just entering on the stormy sea of adversity.

During the first day of the journey Captain Orloff appeared to pay little attention to any of his prisoners, yet an observant eye could perceive that he cast wistful glances at one of the large sleighs every now and again.

In the sleigh thus alluded to an old man of venerable appearance was stretched on a hard board, and whose head was supported by a beautiful young girl, who was scarcely seventeen years of age.

Sitting near the old man and his daughter was another young woman a little more advanced in life, and by her side sat a bright-looking lad, who was not more than seventeen.

The old man appeared to be feeble enough, yet his voice was clear and firm as he addressed his daughter in subdued tones, saying:

"Dear Constance, all hope is over now, but I sigh only for your sake. It is cruel to think that you and your dear companions there should suffer through me."

The young girl pressed the old man's hand, as she responded in brave tones, saying:

"All hope is not over, father, as I feel in my heart that our friends will not desert us."

"Ah, Constance! you do not know how impossible it is to escape from the wilds of Siberia, and the emperor will never pardon me for having refused him the gold that I had not to give."

"The cruel wretch knew that you had not the gold, father, but he only wanted a chance to persecute you."

"I fear that is too true, my dear. I am a Polish nobleman, and though I bent the knee to the tyrant when there was no hope of striking against him, he hungered for my estate, and he demanded money for the war that I could not give him, so that he could banish us and plunder us."

"Oh, father, father, it was foolish of me to declaim against the tyrant, when I should have known that his spies were in every household in the city."

"It is folly to deplore that now, my dear, but I do regret that your good companions there, whom you brought from America to this accursed land, should also be condemned to suffer with us, merely because they spoke freely about the tyrant. Your governess and her brother are free-born Americans, and it is terrible to think that they should be sent to Siberia with us."

The young American governess, whose name was Blanche Dearing, heard the last words and she smiled at the old Polish nobleman as she said to him:

"We are not in Siberia yet, Count Metski, and I hope we will never get there."

The old man bent his head toward the American girl as he eagerly whispered:

"Do you hope to escape with your brother, then, Miss Dearing?"

"We are Americans, count, and we never despair. Your emperor is powerful, yet I have friends in St. Petersburg, and so have you, and they will not forget us."

"Silence, prisoner," thundered one of the guards, as he shook his heavy whip at the old Pole.

The unfortunate prisoners bent their heads and remained silent during that stage of the journey.

The sleighs and their escort halted for the night at a small village, and the unfortunate prisoners were compelled to sleep on the hard boards in the guard-room, where they huddled together to keep warm.

On the following night the prisoners stopped at a much larger village, and the sleigh containing Count Metski and his friends drew up at a large tavern.

Father and daughter were then escorted into the main room of tavern, while the American governess and her young brother were conveyed to the guard-house.

Captain Orloff received the old count and his daughter in the back room of the tavern, and pointed to a well-served table, as he said to them:

"Count Metski, my duty compels me to treat you as a prisoner while we are on the road to Siberia, but I venture to strain a point in order to show some courtesy to an old friend and his fair daughter."

The old Polish nobleman saluted the young officer in a very cold manner, and replied, saying:

"We thank you, Captain Orloff, but we would decline any courtesy that may put us under any obligation to you."

The young girl nodded in approval, and then said:

"That is right, father. We know that Captain Orloff is not our friend, and——"

"Oh, Constance, Constance," interrupted the young officer, "do not say that. I swear to you that you wrong me when you accuse me of betraying you to the emperor. I swear to you that I am now prepared to risk honor, position, favor, and even life itself in order to serve you and your father."

"You cannot serve us, sir," said the old Pole.

"I can and I will, if you will but consent to claim me as your friend. Think of the terrible life before you in Siberia, and remember that I offer you freedom and life in another land, if you will but consent to bestow on me what you refused before. I am willing to betray my trust now, and lead you away from hence to a place of safety in another land. Accept my proposal, I pray you, and I will take measures at once for rescuing you both."

"Then my daughter's hand in marriage is the price you demand for such service?" said the old count.

"I will not ask your daughter's hand in marriage until I have placed you both in a safe refuge. Oh, Constance, Constance, do not refuse me. Think of your father living and dying in the wilds of Siberia, and you doomed to a life-long misery in those terrible regions."

The young girl was about to spurn the offer when a white figure at the window behind the young officer attracted her attention.

That figure was nodding at her in the most emphatic manner, as if begging of her to accept the proposal thus made.

The spirited young girl could not understand why she was thus advised, but she felt that a friend was near, and that it behooved her to act with discretion.

Casting one significant glance at her father, she then addressed the young officer, saying:

"Captain Orloff, I am willing to sacrifice my life in behalf of my dear father, but I cannot consent to your proposal without due reflection and consultation with him."

The young man's face brightened on the instant, and he pointed to the table as he turned toward the door, saying:

"Then I beg you will partake of the good supper I have ordered for you, and I will leave you an hour alone to consult and decide on my fate."

The old nobleman stared at his daughter as he replied to the young officer, saying:

"As you will, sir."

The young officer retired from the room, locking the door after him, and father and daughter seated themselves at the table, the former saying:

"Why did you hesitate in replying to him?"

Before the young girl could reply the window was raised, and a soft friendly voice addressed them, saying:

"Good friends, be not alarmed at what you may now see, as I am a friend in disguise."

A slight exclamation of dismay did escape from the young girl as a form having all the appearance of a white bear sprang in through the window and stood before them holding a sword in one paw and a pistol in the other.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEVEN WHITE BEARS.

Father and daughter stared at the intruder, and they exchanged significant glances without uttering a single word.

The White Bear placed the sword and pistol on the table and continued to address the old count and his daughter in subdued tones, saying:

"Proceed with your supper, friends, and I will consult with you in the meantime."

A smile appeared on the face of the young girl, and she nodded to her father, saying:

"He is an ugly beast, but his voice is kindly, and we will trust him."

"You may trust me, lady, as I am sworn to rescue you and your father or perish in the attempt. Eat and be silent for the present."

The White Bear then stole to the door and bent his ear at the key-hole to listen for a few minutes, while father and daughter proceeded to partake of the good supper placed before them.

Having listened some minutes, the Bear silently drew a bolt on the inside of the door, and then stole back to the table, saying:

"I believe we will not be interrupted by Captain Orloff until the time appointed, yet I would advise you to hasten with your meal, as we must be then hastening away from hence."

Father's and daughter's eyes brightened at the suggestion, and the old man earnestly inquired:

"Then you propose to rescue us at once?"

"That is my purpose, count."

"Who are you, and who are those who aid you?" inquired the old Polish nobleman.

"I cannot answer your question, count. It should be enough for you to know that we are friends who are sworn to rescue you and other innocent victims of the tyrant who rules over Russia at present."

"But how can I know but you are an enemy in disguise, and that you propose to lead us into some trap?"

The White Bear drew himself up to his full height, and

placed his right hand on his breast as he responded, saying in very earnest tones:

"Count Metski, I will inform you that two of your best friends are engaged with us in the present enterprise, but I cannot mention their names. The band which I lead numbers seven in all, with the addition of a driver, who has charge of our sleigh."

"But why cannot you mention any of the names?"

"Because we are sworn to secrecy on that point, and it may be that you will never know, if we succeed in rescuing you and your fair daughter, to whom you are indebted."

"Are you all disguised in that manner?" inquired the young lady.

"We are."

"And can we not see your face?"

"Not at present; and though you may see it in after years, if I survive, you will not know who serves you now."

"Why act in this mysterious manner?" inquired the old count.

The White Bear shrugged his shoulders, and then replied to him in colder tones, saying:

"Is it wise for you, Count Metski, to question the motives or the actions of one who seeks to befriend you at the risk of his life?"

"That is true, father," remarked the young girl. "We should avail ourselves of the chance of escape offered us without questioning our unknown friend."

"Wisely spoken, young lady," said the White Bear. "Will you have full confidence in me?"

"We will," promptly answered the old Pole.

"Oh, my dear sir," pleaded the young lady, "we have two dear friends in the train who are being sent to Siberia on our account; is it not possible to rescue them with us?"

"You allude to the young American lady and her brother?"

"I do, sir."

"The young lady and her brother will be rescued, but not to-night."

"But why not to-night?"

"Because it is impossible. They are confined in the guard-house, and they are surrounded by more than twenty-five soldiers. We number but seven, and while we are prepared for desperate encounters, it would not be wise in us to dare impossibilities at the outset."

Having thus expressed himself, the White Bear stole to the window by which he had entered, and peered out, while he motioned to the old count and his daughter to eat as fast as possible.

"Will we trust him, Constance?" whispered the old man.

"By all means, father. While the strange being disguises his voice, I feel certain that his tones are somewhat familiar to me."

"And can you not recognize his voice, Constance?"

"I cannot, sir, but my heart prompts me to trust in the strange being."

"Then we will trust him."

A peculiar cry fell on the White Bear's ear at the moment as he stood at the window, and he turned hastily to the table, saying:

"The moment has come, Count Metski. Will you and your daughter come with me?"

"We will."

"Then I will bear your daughter forth, and you follow in my footsteps as close as you can when outside. Young lady, pardon me for clasping you in my rough arms, but you are too frail to tramp through the deep snow."

As the White Bear spoke, he lifted the tender young girl in his arms, and advanced to the window with her, saying:

"Utter not a word or a cry, and follow in my footsteps, noble sir."

The White Bear sprang lightly out of the window with the young girl in his arms, having secured the sword and pistol before leaving the apartment.

He then stole cautiously across the yard and into a narrow path at the rear, the old count following him and treading in his footsteps as carefully as possible.

Not a word was uttered by the fugitives until they reached the small wood about two hundred yards back from the tavern, where the young girl addressed the White Bear in soft tones, saying:

"I will walk now, sir, as I weary you too much."

"You do not weary me, and you must not touch the ground until we reach a conveyance close at hand."

They had not proceeded far through the wood, when they reached a sleigh drawn by four black horses, and in which six other white figures appeared.

On placing the young lady in the sleigh, her strange conductor assisted the old man in also, saying:

"Thank heaven that we have succeeded so far without shedding the blood of our countrymen."

He then sprang into the sleigh, and his six companions arose to greet him, raising their swords aloft as one of them said:

"Brave leader, we salute you on your first success, and we trust that it is an omen of future victories over the tyrant."

"We will succeed," was the curt response from the leader.

"Driver, on to our destination."

The driver wore a thick fur coat, and a cap of the same material was drawn down over his face.

After glancing around at the seven white figures, who had seated themselves in the sleigh, the old count looked at the driver and noticed that he held the reins on the well-trained steeds with a hook, which was fastened on his left wrist.

After attempting to peer into the driver's face, the old man turned to the leader of the Bears and inquired:

"Is not that Peter, the old soldier who has served my old friend, Dr. Norgo, for years past?"

"Yes, count. Peter is our guide in the present mission, as he has often traveled to Siberia along this route, and he is familiar with the mountains by the way."

A sigh of relief burst from the old Pole and he turned to his daughter, saying:

"I feel that we are with good friends now, my dear girl, as Dr. Norgo is one of my oldest and best friends."

"I felt it from the first, sir," answered the young lady as she cast a smile at the leader of the Bears.

That person bowed in as gallant a manner as he could in a sitting position, and replied, saying:

"Thanks for your confidence, young lady."

The sleigh was moving swiftly up toward the mountain, and father and daughter were reclining on soft rugs, while heavy furs were flung over them to protect them from the cold night air.

Captain Orloff was at the door of the dining-room promptly at the hour appointed, and great was his surprise on finding it secured on the inside.

Calling on some of the soldiers on duty in the tavern the door was burst in; and then an exclamation of rage burst from the young officer on perceiving that his guests had flown.

The enraged young officer soon modified his wrath, however, and he approached the window muttering to himself:

"They cannot have proceeded far in the snow, and the hounds will soon track them."

Calling on a dozen of his men to mount in haste, the young man ran to the guard-house, where three large Siberian bloodhounds were chained at the time.

The savage beasts were kept at all the stations along the

routes to Siberia, for the purpose of hunting down any of the unfortunate criminals who succeeded in escaping from the guards during the journey.

The three hounds were led forth by three mounted keepers, who held them in check by long steel chains formed in thin links.

On reaching the window at the back of the tavern, and on receiving instructions from their keepers, the bloodhounds took up the human scent and bounded away toward the wood, baying in an ominous manner, and tugging at the chain as if eager for blood.

Captain Orloff rode on after the keepers at the head of a dozen of the mounted guards, the young officer crying, in loud and imperative tones:

"On your lives, slaves, do not let the dogs touch the prisoners when they come up with them, and they cannot be far off."

The three keepers were serfs, or slaves, whose chief occupation was in hunting down the unfortunate human beings who managed to escape for a time while on the journey to Siberia.

One of the keepers noticed that but a single track appeared in the snow, and he turned to the officer, crying:

"Noble captain, I see but one track in the snow, and it is that of a man."

"Then the old wretch bears his daughter in his arms and they cannot be far off. Hold the hounds in check, as you will suffer death if they touch either of the prisoners."

On reaching the spot in the woods where the fugitives had entered the sleigh, the hounds drew up for a time and the foremost keeper cried:

"Noble captain, the prisoners had friends to receive them here, as you can perceive the marks of a sleigh drawn by four horses."

A terrible imprecation burst from the young officer as he looked down on the snow-covered ground and perceived the footprints of the horses.

He then turned to the keeper of the hounds who had addressed him and impatiently cried:

"Set the hounds on the track of the horses, and ride away with them at full speed. Ride for your lives, slaves, as I will have you put to death if the prisoners escape us to-night."

The three keepers rode away at full speed, with the baying hounds before them.

Then on after the hunters dashed Captain Orloff and his mounted men, the former crying:

"Death to the traitors who would assist the prisoners in escaping from the emperor's power!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BLOODHOUNDS AND THE WHITE BEARS.

The sleigh did not proceed very fast on its journey up the mountain, as the old veteran knew that the good horses had a long journey before them, and he did not care to tire them at the start.

On reaching a hut about five miles from the village the leader called a halt, saying:

"Our spare horses are here, and we will rest here for a short time."

The young Polish girl and her father were then led into the large hut, a portion of which served as a stable for the black horses held in reserve.

All the members of the band entered the hut with the fugitives.

At a word from the leader three of the band then hastened out to assist old Peter in changing the horses under the

sleigh, while the others offered refreshments to the old man and his daughter.

The old Pole and his daughter endeavored to draw the other members of the band into conversation, but the leader always answered for them.

"Are your friends deaf and dumb?" inquired the young girl, with a playful smile.

"They have all taken a vow of silence, young lady, and I alone am permitted to speak."

"It must be very distressing on you, sir, to answer for all."

"Not on the present occasion, I assure you. What is it, Peter."

The old veteran strode into the hut at the moment, and saluted the leader as he replied:

"The hounds are on our track, captain."

The old man and his daughter started in terror at the announcement, but the leader of the strange band motioned to them to resume their seats before the fire as he inquired of Peter:

"How near are the dogs?"

"About half a league down the mountain, captain."

"How many of them?"

"Three, each with a keeper on horseback, while a troop of soldiers ride on behind."

"How far behind?"

"About half a mile, captain."

The leader turned to his men and gave his orders in a calm, clear voice, saying:

"Saddle three of the horses taken from the sleigh and prepare the others for the journey. Volga, Don, you will ride back with me to meet the hounds."

The three saddle horses were ready in very short order, and the old Pole and his daughter were escorted out to the sleigh.

As the leader sprang on one of the black steeds he addressed the young girl, saying:

"Look down the mountain, young lady, and you will see three white bears in an encounter with an equal number of Siberian bloodhounds."

"That will be delightful, sir. But what weapons will you use against the brutes?"

"Our swords only. Don, you ride on my right, and you, Volga, on my left. Spare the poor slaves who hold the brutes, as they are not armed, but death to the bloodhounds who would track our friends to death or to eternal misery."

The two other horsemen only answered by waving their swords as they dashed down the mountain side to encounter the ferocious hounds.

The bloodhounds and their keepers were about half a mile down the mountain at the time.

When the poor serfs saw the three strange horsemen riding down against them, they became terror-stricken, and their leader cried:

"Hold the dogs in until the soldiers come up."

The bloodthirsty animals had been so eager in the chase that they forced their keepers along at such a speed as to leave the mounted soldiers far behind.

Those in charge of the dogs had good horses under them, while the soldiers were not well mounted, with the exception of the troop on a very strong and swift animal.

As the three white figures drew near on the black horses the keepers became paralyzed with terror, and they allowed the hounds to break away from them.

When the terrible animals were within about two hundred yards of the mounted Bears, the leader of the band drew up his steed, as he cried: "Dismount, brothers, and advance to meet the brutes on foot."

The three Bears dismounted on the instant, their well-trained horses standing perfectly quiet, even while the fero-

cious brutes below sent forth fiercer growls than before. Down against the brutes rushed the three brave swordsmen with their weapons aloft, their leader saying to the others:

"Ten paces more, and we will meet them on one knee. Be certain to strike at the heart as they spring for our throats, brave brothers."

The well-trained bloodhounds advanced to the attack together, and together they raised themselves to spring at their fearless foes.

"Strike at the heart," cried the leader of the Band of Fate, as he made a thrust at the center hound.

"At the heart," responded tall Volga, as he sent forth his weapon in turn.

"At the heart it is," remarked Don, as he plunged his weapon into the fierce brute, who was springing at his throat.

The three bloodhounds sank on the ground, sending forth dying moans, and up on their feet sprang the fearless swordsmen, their leader crying:

"Poor serfs, we are your friends. Ride on with us as fast as you can, or you will be put to death for losing your hounds."

The keepers had drawn up a short distance below, as if to witness the brief conflict, and when thus addressed in friendly tones they all cast uneasy glances back at the advancing soldiers, while they remembered Captain Orloff's threat at the same time.

That young officer was dashing along far ahead of his men, and waving his sword in a frantic manner, while he yelled out:

"You treacherous dogs!" cried Captain Orloff, "you are in league with the beasts above, and you will be put to death for not guarding the hounds."

Being thus threatened on one side and welcomed on the other, the three poor serfs set spurs to their horses and rode up to the strange riders at full speed, their leader crying:

"Whoever you are, brave leaders, we will ride up for you."

"You are wise," answered the disguised leader; "and now ride on. Halt here a few moments for me, my brave brothers."

The leader then dashed down to meet Captain Orloff as he yelled aloud:

"Halt there, Captain Orloff, as I want a few words with you."

"I'll answer you with my sword, you traitorous scoundrels!"

"With the sword be it then," cried the strange being as he forced his black steed down to the encounter, "and a word at the same time."

"Death is the word for you, traitor," yelled Captain Orloff, as he aimed a fierce blow at the bearded figure when the two brutes came together.

"Stop! Stop!" answered the other, as he vaulted off the black steed and in a moment that here the young officer found his ally to the death.

The three men cast one glance back at the mounted soldiers, who were advancing within about three hundred yards of them, and continued:

"I will take your horse as a forfeit, Captain Orloff, and remember that the White Bears have baffled you in your plot against Count Metski and his daughter, and they will baffle you again."

Then up to the foremost rode their gallant leader as he cried:

"Come with us now, brothers, and we can laugh at our pursuers."

Captain Orloff was not much injured by the blow on the forehead, but he fell when his men rode up to him, and he was left alone.

"These captives, who these will be, will you be satisfied with?"

The young officer was staring up after the White Bears, as he rubbed his head in a dazed manner, as he muttered aloud:

"Is that the voice of the dead I heard, or can it be that Ruth Jones is still alive and in that barbarous disguise?"

"Will we pursue the traitors, captain?" inquired the soldier who had spoken before.

"Yes, yes, we will pursue the fiends. Dismount from the best horse in the troop, and I will lead you on after the treacherous dogs."

One of the soldiers was compelled to dismount and take shelter in the deserted hut for the time, while on after, the Seven White Bears and their friends rode the enraged young officer and his troop, the former muttering in fierce tones:

"Ruth Jones had not a brother, and her father is dead. It must have been her own voice I heard, when I could have sworn that her bones were lying at the bottom of the Duna."

Large snowflakes commenced to fall at the moment, and the young officer had not proceeded over a mile in the pursuit when he called a halt, crying:

"We cannot track the traitors in this snow, and we will return. The dogs cannot escape from this mountain, as all the paths will be guarded. We will capture the traitors in a few days and put them all to death!"

CHAPTER VI.

A BRAVE AMERICAN GIRL.

Early on the following morning the silent cavalcade moved on again, with two of the prisoners of the former day counted among the missing.

Blanche Dearing, the brave young American governess, looked in vain for Constance Metski and her father, and she waited a chance to whisper to her young brother, saying:

"Did I not tell you that our brave friends would not forget us, Mort?"

"Then you think, Blanche, that Constance and her father have been rescued?"

"Certainly I do."

Captain Orloff rode up to the sleigh at the moment, and there was a fierce frown on his handsome countenance as he glared at the young American girl and her brother.

"Keep silent, foreign dogs, or you will feel the knout at the next station," he cried.

The brave American girl cast a scornful glance at the young tyrant, and she could not keep back the reply that arose to her lips, although realizing full well that she was in the rascal's power.

"And was it to punish Count Metski and his daughter for talking yesterday that you took them into the tavern last night, noble captain?"

A terrible imprecation burst from the young officer, and he rode on, crying:

"I will punish you for your insolence in the guard-house to-night."

The young girl felt for the small dagger hidden in the folds of her dress as she glared after the rascal, and said to herself:

"I don't think you'll live to see me punished, if you try it."

On reaching the next station, where they were to stop for the night, brother and sister were separated from the other prisoners and led into a small tavern.

Captain Orloff was reported to the tavern and his prisoners were taken to the guard-house, and he remained there all night.

"Pardon me for the rude manner in which I spoke to you this morning, young lady, as I was compelled to keep up an appearance of discipline before the guards, and those men cannot understand us now."

"You are a soldier and you must obey orders, sir."

The young hypocrite sighed as he continued:

"Yes, I am a soldier, but, alas! I am in disgrace now, through my love for one who has heretofore rejected me with scorn."

"How is that, captain?"

"Are you not aware that Constance Metski and her father escaped last night?"

"I was not, captain, but I rejoice that it is so."

"I rejoice also, but that escape will bring eternal disgrace on me, for the emperor will surely punish me under the belief that I was instrumental in it, if I am not put to death."

"That is too bad, captain; but can you not prove that you were not concerned in their escape in any manner or form?"

"Unfortunately for me, I cannot prove my innocence, as I risked too much for the lady I love."

"Then I am to understand that you aided in their escape, captain?"

"How could they escape without my aid? As I have risked so much, and as I must fly to escape punishment, I will also aid you and your brother in escaping to-night, and then we can seek your friends."

The prisoner bowed to the officer and addressed him in manly tones, saying:

The prisoner bowed to the officer and addressed him in manly tones, saying:

"Who is this?" demanded Captain Orloff, as he stared at the prisoner, and then at one of the soldiers holding him.

"He was riding your horse into the village, captain, and we seized him," answered the soldier.

The prisoner bowed to the officer and addressed him in manly tones, saying:

"I can assure you, Captain Orloff, that I did not steal your horse, as I can explain how he came into my possession."

"Then explain, sir."

"As you can observe by my passport, captain, I belong to a party of young gentlemen who started out on a hunting expedition to the Ural Mountains three days ago."

Captain Orloff examined the passport, handed to him, and remarked:

"This is correct, sir. Proceed."

"We were traveling along yesterday morning in our sleigh when we were suddenly attacked by seven robbers disguised as white bears, who sprung suddenly out on us from behind a snow-drift, and before we had a chance to offer any resistance."

"And what happened to you then, sir?"

"The robbers took possession of the sleigh, and the eight of us were taken away as prisoners, taking us into a dense wood on the right."

The prisoner then went on to give a plausible account of his escape from the robbers, and continued, saying:

"After a long journey through the snow I reached the house of a farmer who dwells in from the mountains. I could proceed this way, but I had to leave the animal I rode when I entered the house, and I had to leave the animal I rode when I entered the house."

The young officer and the officer of the young officer, together with the prisoner, were the only ones who remained in the house, and the prisoner was the only one who remained in the house."

"You will be my guest, sir, and sup with me. Then we will see about pursuing the robbers."

The young stranger appeared to be delighted with his reception by the young officer, and he presented a handful of gold and silver money to the soldiers who had captured him, as he said:

"Let all our soldier friends at the station here drink at my expense. Captain Orloff, I insist on your having supper with me, and your friends here also."

The stranger then pretended to notice Blanche and her brother for the first time, and he bowed to them in the most respectful manner.

Captain Orloff had a deep motive in gaining the confidence of the young American, and he gave some of the gold to one of the guards, who released brother and sister without making any display.

After ordering wine and supper for the party, the young stranger made himself very agreeable to Captain Orloff and the young Americans, while he kept passing in and out of the room to encourage the soldiers on duty in their drinking bouts.

A substantial supper was soon served, during which Captain Orloff drank freely of the wine presented to him by the stranger.

At the hour of midnight all the soldiers at the station were under the influence of liquor, and their post was left unguarded at the supper table, and the young American went to his new friend.

"Just wait until the Cossacks with their fleet horses get on the track of the rascals," he cried, "and then we will slay them like wolves or flay them alive."

At that moment seven white forms stole silently into the supper room and ranged themselves behind Captain Orloff and his friend without attracting the attention of the young officer.

The brave American girl perceived the strangers, however, and she turned to her brother and whispered:

"The White Bears will soon answer for themselves."

CHAPTER VII.

REAL WORK FOR THE WHITE BEARS.

Mort Dearing saw the White Bears also, and he was so excited at their appearance that he could only answer his sister by a nod.

Whether the stranger perceived the strange figures or not, he kept on conversing with Captain Orloff, as he said to him:

"As they cannot be common robbers, I cannot imagine what their object is in assailing peaceable travelers and taking their horses from them."

The young officer cast a significant glance at Blanche Dearing, as he replied:

"I know what their object is, and you may be assured that their career will soon be brought to a close by the death of them all."

"Have you any idea, captain, who those seven strangers may be?"

"I presume that they are traitors who are conspiring against the emperor; but we will soon know who they are, as the Cossacks of the Don are on their track, and the white horsemen will fall in hunting down their game, as their enemies know full well."

"The Cossacks of the Don are good riders and brave fighters," remarked the young American, "but the White Bears are still more so. I have seen them in the mountains, and I have seen them in the mountains, and I have seen them in the mountains."

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of the best horses that could be selected in the stables of the fortress. Then Captain Orloff's good steed stood ready for the young stranger again.

Old Peter made a show of leading the young prisoner on the road by pressing a pistol at his head and crying out in gruff tones:

"Mount that horse and ride with us, or I will blow your brains out."

The Cossacks were still pressing on the fugitives, when the seven bears turned suddenly on them and dashed to meet the lancers, as their leader cried:

"One lesson for the Cossacks, and they will not forget the mount and away."

Right on the lancers sprang the seven swordsmen, and sharp was the work in thrusting and hurling back the dashing Cossacks.

Then sprang at the captain of the Cossacks again, and once more did the leader's sword fall from his grasp.

The young swordsmen then turned and made sweeping blows at two of the white lancers, knocking their weapons from their grasps in an instant.

Then was other splendid work at the same time, and so were the others, while the captain of the band kept his sword in full play, as he kept crying:

"One lesson for the Cossacks, and they will not forge the Seven White Bears."

The struggle was soon over, the Cossacks were disabled and defeated, and then the White Bears sprang toward their horses, their leader crying:

"Away now, and let us see if the riders from the Don can cope with our black steeds."

At that moment twenty horsemen dashed around at the end of the valley, and one of the white lancers led the captain's steed by the bridle.

Seeing a horse that had fallen from one of his defeated men, the half-savage chief sprang on his steed and spurred on after the black horses as he yelled to his men in furious tones:

"After the dogs—the brutes—and we'll soon leave their bones whitening on the mountain side."

Away dashed the black lancers and their riders, their leader yelling back:

"Come on, brave Cossacks, and the White Bears will soon give you another lesson."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COSSACKS OF THE DON.

Blanche had watched the brief conflict with thrilling interest, and she more than once turned to her brother, crying in excited tones:

"Oh, Mark, would that I had a weapon so that I could aid our brave friends!"

"And wouldst thou?" answered the brave lad, who was a fine and strong for his years, as he was scarcely seventeen at the time.

The old veteran watched the struggle with the deepest interest, while he still kept up a show of keeping watch over the prisoner.

And the prisoner was as nervous as a hare, as he sat on his horse and stared back at the White Bears and the Cossacks, and glanced to himself, saying:

"The danger is over. If I live the rest I am playing now, and would that I could take my place with my valiant brethren."

Then the danger was over, and the White Bears sprang on their horses, the old veteran mounted at the same time, and seized the bridle rein of the prisoner's horse, as he said to him in his loud, gruff tones:

"Don't attempt to escape or I will stretch you higher in the snow. On with you close behind me, young lady, and I will guide you to your good friends."

Then on up toward the mountain dashed the White Bears and their friends, and on after them rode the Cossacks, their chief urging on his men to the utmost speed by offering them rewards for the destruction of the fugitives.

The fugitives and their friends numbered eleven in all, and the eight black horses were engaged in bearing them away.

Old Peter rode the eighth black animal, the young stranger was mounted on Captain Orloff's good steed, and Blanche and her brother were supplied with the two best horses to be found in the stables.

The Cossacks pressed on at full speed for a time, but the leader became less excited after a while, and he then called on his men to pull up a little, crying:

"The robbers are well mounted, but we will soon tire them out. Our steeds are not as fleet as theirs in a short race, but they are tireless, and so are their riders, my brave men."

The Cossacks answered with a shout, and they then settled down to that tireless gait so familiar to the famous riders of the North.

The leader of the White Bears perceived the Cossacks settling down to their tireless work, and he rode up to old Peter, saying:

"Our friends are resolved on giving us a long chase, Peter, and what would you advise?"

Before old Peter could reply the prisoner addressed the captain of the Bears, and inquired:

"Can I not throw off the mark now, brave friend?"

"You can talk as much as you please, brother, but you cannot act with us until we dispose of the Cossacks who pursue us."

The young stranger shrugged his shoulders, and looked back, as he retorted, saying:

"Would that I could be one of you again, as I feel that you will have more sword play before long. How did that substitute of mine bear himself?"

"Right gallantly," answered the leader. "Although he is only a girl, he is a splendid swordsman, and we will entell him in the band should one of us fall in our glorious work."

Old Peter had been looking back at the steady-moving Cossacks, and he then turned to the leader and remarked:

"Yes, they will follow us like bloodhounds. I know the rascals well, as I marched with them against the Turks many years ago."

"Would it be well to turn and give them battle, Peter?" inquired the leader.

The old veteran shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, as he replied:

"They are Russians, and I hate to strike against my own countrymen, except as a last resort. Yet we must baffle them in some way, or they will follow us and tire us out before we can reach our place of refuge."

"What would you suggest then, good Peter?" inquired the leader.

"I must ponder for some time. Had we all black steeds we could soon outstrip them. Press on there, young lady, and do not spare your horse."

Blanche urged on her horse with the whip which had been supplied her, as she answered in very merry tones:

"If we could but capture a few of the fleet black steeds we might be all well."

"That is a brilliant suggestion, young lady," responded the

leader, "and it would be well to ponder over it. Set your wits to work, Peter."

"I will, captain."

The leader drew back to his disguised friends again, muttering:

"If I had served in the army, like Peter, I could baffle those bloodhounds behind us and I must set my wits to work also. Don, ride on by my side, as I wish to consult with you."

The young man thus addressed drew his horse up beside his leader and inquired:

"What do you wish to say, captain?"

"You were familiar with the Cossacks of your locality in other days, I presume?"

"I saw a good deal of the horsemen in my early youth, captain."

"Can you not then suggest some means of getting rid of our friends behind without bloodshed?"

The young man thus addressed pondered some moments, looking back at the horsemen two or three times before he replied, saying:

"I know the chief of that band, and he is a brave man and a vengeful one. It would be difficult to baffle him now, when he rides to avenge his lost honor; yet it may be done by bold work."

"And without much bloodshed, Don?"

"Yes, captain, and without much bloodshed, I trust."

"What do you propose, then?"

"I propose to capture him. You see that he rides ahead of his men?"

"Yes, as he is evidently mounted on the best horse in the band," answered the leader.

"Then it would be all the better if we can secure horse and rider both, brave captain."

"How do you propose to do it?"

Don cast a glance ahead, and he soon perceived that the mountain path made a sudden turn to the left about two hundred yards above.

He then addressed the captain again, saying:

"Give me permission to assail the chief alone, and I promise you to take him captive."

"In what manner?"

"Give me permission, and you will perceive. Have confidence in me, captain, and I will not fail."

"I have confidence in you, brave Don, and I give you permission to try the experiment."

"When we gain the rocks ahead, then," said Don, "ride on without me."

The chief appeared to understand the plan to be put in force by the daring young fellow, and he nodded in approval as he remarked:

"Be careful, my brave brother, as we must not lose you at the outset of our career."

"Fear not on my account, as I am able to cope with Captain Musko again."

The plan then passed on until they reached the bare rocks, when the old guide turned suddenly to the left along a narrow path, and the pursuing Cossacks were left to fight for the time.

While the others rode on at full speed, Don pulled back, wheeling his horse round, and led him behind the snow-covered rocks as he said to himself:

"Now to surprise Capt. Musko, and it is little he dreams who his pursuer would be any time, or to be if I should ever make myself known to him."

The young man, chief of the Seven White Bears, still kept close to the mountain side, and he came up a little way, passing the snow-covered rocks, and the fugitives had disappeared.

Before turning in on the path the Cossack chief waved his lance aloft and cried back:

"Fear not an ambush, brave Cossacks, as the dogs will not dare to encounter us again."

The words were scarcely uttered when out on the Cossack chief dashed one of the black steeds and its dauntless young rider.

Without uttering a word Don swept down on his enemy and struck at him with his sword before the Cossack could place his lance in rest.

The blow knocked the lance from the Cossack's grasp, and Don held the sword over his head as he cried out in stern tones:

"Spur on now, captain, or I will cut you down without mercy."

A slight yell of rage burst from the Cossack, yet he set spurs to his horse, Don urging the steed on with a blow from the sword at the same time.

The spirited steed bounded forward at his best pace, and along by his side rode the White Bear with the sword uplifted again as he cried:

"You are my prisoner, brave captain, and your lancers will charge and march without a leader to-night."

The Cossack chief glared at the disguised youth as he cried:

"In the fiend's name who are you?"

"One of the Seven White Bears, brave captain."

The pursuing Cossacks turned suddenly into the path at the moment, and a yell of rage burst from them as they saw their chief without a lance or other weapon riding away with the White Bear at full speed, and with a gleaming sword suspended over his head.

Turning in his saddle for an instant the Cossack chief cried:

"Rescue me, brave Cossacks, as I was caught in a treacherous trap."

"We will rescue you, brave chief!"

"You will not," yelled Don. "Turn and retreat, or I will slay your chief before your eyes."

The Cossacks had spurred on to their utmost speed, and Don and his prisoner were drawing up on the Bears ahead when the young fellow made the threat.

Raising his sword aloft again, he cried to the Cossack chief in thrilling tones:

"Captain Musko, I know you to be a merciless wretch, and I will slay you on the instant if you do not order your men to retreat."

The Cossack captain was a brave man, yet he quailed before that uplifted blade, and he turned on the instant and yelled back to his men, crying:

"Retreat, retreat, my good friends, as my life will pay the forfeit if you advance further."

"Order them to retreat to the station!" cried Don, in threatening tones.

"Retreat to the station," yelled the Cossack chief.

The word passed down the line, and a yell of rage burst from them as they wheeled their steeds and retreated down the mountain side.

A wild shout of exultation burst from the Seven White Bears and their prisoner as the fugitives rode up to them, with his prisoner, crying:

"I have caught the Cossack, and he will be tame enough now."

The leader of the band clapped the young fellow on the head, as he cried in joyful tones:

"You are a brave youth, and you must be the leader of this band if you prove faithful."

"May that never happen, brave captain. Let me remain your prisoner, and my life will be yours."

Old Peter accompanied the band to act as a guide.

The three keepers of the bloodhounds were left behind in the cave to wait on the escaped prisoners, and to guard them if necessary.

The unfortunate serfs were delighted in the change in their fortunes, although they had become outlaws and liable to be put to death for desertion if taken by the soldiers.

They were brave fellows, well accustomed to the use of fire-arms when hunting with their masters, and they had already become attached to the daring White Bears and the rescued prisoners.

All those left in the cave were supplied with good rifles and pistols, as the old Pole and the young American were resolved to fight to the death if attacked during the absence of the White Bears.

Blanche Dearing and Constance Metski were supplied with weapons also, the American girl saying:

"I would prefer to die fighting against the tyrant's soldiers rather than go to that horrid Siberia."

All the members of the band were deeply mortified over the escape of the cunning Cossack chief.

The old guide led in the hunt for the Cossack chief, Peter being mounted on the stout steed taken from Captain Orloff.

The leader of the White Bears and Don rode together after the old guard, the former saying:

"My good Don, it was a great blunder on our part to permit the escape of your Cossack friend."

Don shrugged his shoulders and peered ahead, as he replied:

"We cannot expect to be perfect, captain, with so little experience."

"You have said that you knew this man in former days, Don?"

"Yes, I knew him, and I can tell you that he is one who will work night and day to crush us now. Captain Musko is brave and vigilant, and he possesses all the qualities of a bloodhound in hunting down those who have excited his animosity."

The eyes of the female chief flashed with fire from under her mask, as she responded in bitter tones, saying:

"Yes, I knew Captain Musko also, and I have reason to hate the wretch. He is more dangerous than Captain Orloff, although the latter is fully as wicked at heart."

Old Peter was pressing forward as fast as the good steed could bear him through the heavy snow.

They had just gained the point where the deep-wooded valley opened up to the mountain side, and the footprints of the Cossack were still clear before them.

The active fugitive had then turned his steps up the mountain, and it was very evident that he had been pursued on with relentless vigor.

As they advanced up the long mountain path the footprints of the fugitive became more distinct, and the old guide pulled up at length and pointed the direction, saying:

"That captain, the chief, chased the leader of the Cossacks, and I cannot now tell but he may have turned aside to seek shelter in some cave along here."

Don quickly responded Don. "The Cossack is not alone, he has a party of about twenty men, and they are now on the mountain side, waiting for him to come back."

The old guide took his head and stared up the mountain as he replied, saying:

"He must be quick of foot, or else he could not get on so the mountain in that snow-covered path, as you have said."

"The tracks of the chief," replied Don, in emphatic tones. "That Cossack is the leader of the band who have him last night, and he will reach the mountain side in the afternoon and he will be with us at once though he may sleep in the night."

The chief of the White Bears nodded in approval, and then said:

"Our brother speaks the truth, Peter. Captain Musko is a man of iron nerves, and we will push on in pursuit of him as fast as our horses will bear us without tiring them too much."

The old guide cast a wistful glance up the mountain and then led the way again as he remarked:

"The Cossack must have two or three hours' start of us, at least, or we would be up with him ere now if he is not hiding in some cave."

They pushed on up the mountain at a regular gallop, old Peter keeping a sharp lookout ahead in the meantime.

On reaching the turn in the path where Don had captured the chief on the previous night, the old guide drew up suddenly and turned to the captain, saying:

"Brother Don was correct, as the Cossack is right here below us now."

"Then why not press on in pursuit, Peter?" eagerly inquired the captain.

"Dismount and peer out from behind the rock before I answer you, good captain."

The leader of the White Bears sprang from the horse and peered out from behind the rock for a moment.

He then turned suddenly and addressed Don, saying:

"Yes, the Cossack is making his way down the mountain."

"Then why not pursue him at once?" eagerly inquired Don.

"Because a strong party of his followers are riding up to meet him."

The youth from the Don sprang from his horse on the instant and hastened to peer out from behind the rock as if to take a survey of the situation.

He then turned hastily to the chief of the band, as he exclaimed:

"Oh, would that we had a spare horse, and I could capture the Cossack before he joined his friends. Then we could defy the Cossacks to pursue us to the cave."

Old Peter sprang on his own steed on the instant, and then stood erect on the animal's back, as he said to the youth:

"Take my horse, brave brother, and I will find shelter in here until I can rejoin you again in the cave."

While thus speaking, the old veteran made a bound from the animal's back, and sprang over behind the large sheltering rock.

The youth from the Don availed himself of the chance on the instant by springing on his own animal and seizing the bridle rein of the other, while he addressed the leader of the band and hastily inquired:

"Have I your permission, brave captain?"

"You have, but I will ride on with you in pursuit of the Cossack. Remain here, brothers, under shelter of the rock, and only ride down if you should hear my signal."

Then down the mountain dashed the two riders and the spare horse, the leader of the band crying:

"Now for a close hunt for the Cossack."

The Cossack chief was struggling through the heavy snow, and he was about a mile down the mountain at the moment.

About a mile and a half below him rode a party of about fifty of his followers, led by Captain Orloff, who was riding in advance of the others.

The weary Cossack was staggering in the snow, yet he nerved himself again on seeing his pursuers, and he dashed on down the mountain path, leading the party of about fifty of his followers.

Captain Orloff and the Cossack chief were now within the path of the Cossack chief, and they were now within the path of the Cossack chief, and they were now within the path of the Cossack chief.

dashed up as fast as they could, shouting and yelling in furious tones.

The pursuers above had the advantage in the chase, however, as their horses could dash down the mountain side much faster than the others could ascend.

The Cossack chief became frantic with rage as he turned and saw his pursuers closing on him, and he then drew a sword, which he had secured before his flight, as he yelled aloud:

"I will fight to the death before you fiends can take me again. Press on, press on, my brave friends, and we will crush the traitors who strike against the emperor?"

Don was striving to gallop ahead of the leader, in order to encounter the Cossack first, but he was somewhat impeded by the spare horse.

The captain of the band forged ahead, drawing his sword as he cried:

"Look to the horse, Don, and I will engage to disarm this wild Cossack."

The Cossack chief cast one anxious glance below before turning in the path to defend himself against his foremost pursuer, and he cried:

"Come on, traitor, and I will make you feel the weight of a Cossack's arm."

A mocking laugh burst from the female leader as she bore down on the weary chief with her sword uplifted, and she then cried, in hoarse tones:

"You could not meet me on equal terms last night, Captain Musko, and you are but a child in my hands now."

Down fell the sword in the hand of the rider, and the weapon of the Cossack fell from his grasp a second later.

Raising the weapon over the Cossack's head, Captain Duna then cried:

"Mount that spare horse and ride back with us at full speed, or I will cleave you on the instant."

The Cossack cast one anxious glance back at his approaching friends, while the leader of the White Bears cried in still more angry tones:

"Hesitate another instant and I will slay you where you stand."

The Cossack did not hesitate another moment, as he sprang on the spare horse, and he looked back in defiant tones:

"You have defeated me again, traitors, but my hour will come yet!"

A shout of triumph from the Cossacks below as they beheld the capture of their chief, and Captain Orloff's voice rang out, crying:

"Bring on now, Cossacks, and rescue our chief from the accursed traitors!"

The two White Bears and their prisoner were dashing up the mountain at the moment, and the leader turned in his saddle and waved his sword in defiance, as he yelled back:

"Come on, traitors, and the White Bears will give you something to think of!"

Captain Orloff was selected a foot ahead, and he was leading the band to the summit.

The fugitives turned about and did not know up at the turn of the path, and he was some thirty yards ahead of the Cossacks at the time.

One Cossack turned close to the spare horse a muffled figure sprang from the saddle, and dashed on the horse behind Captain Orloff.

An unusual sound and the muffled figure was flying in the air, and the band was dashing away with the muffled figure on the ground.

CHAPTER XI.

PURSuing THE WHITE BEARS.

Another fearful yell of rage burst from the Cossack horsemen as they wheeled into the path and perceived Captain Orloff floundering in the snow, while away galloped the officer's horse with the muffled figure on his back.

The leader of the White Bears cast his eyes back at the moment, and a joyous exclamation burst from him and the others as they recognized old Peter galloping on after them on the fast steed he had secured by such a clever trick.

The Cossacks spurred on still faster, and some of them hurled their long lances after the old veteran.

Captain Orloff regained his feet and ordered one of the Cossacks to dismount, saying:

"Remain behind the rock until we return, as I must push on in pursuit of the traitors."

The lances flung at old Peter did not touch the horse or its rider, while the pursuers regained their weapons again without scarcely pausing in their headlong course.

Old Peter increased the speed of the animal until he was up with his friends, and he then turned and burst out into a hearty fit of laughter, saying:

"I did not like that cold station behind the rock, and I remembered that you may need my services in evading our pursuers, brave captain."

"You are a hero, Peter," replied the leader of the Bears in joyous tones, "and we would fare badly, indeed, without you."

The old veteran patted the steed under him on the neck and responded, saying:

"This good animal will repay me for my trouble, and now press on, as we must give them the slip on reaching the valley below."

"But can they not track us to the cave by our footprints in the snow, good Peter?" inquired the leader in somewhat anxious tones.

The old veteran looked up at the sky for a few moments before he replied:

"We can only pray for more snow, and then we can laugh at the Cossacks."

"Will it snow soon, think you?"

"Another storm is coming, but it will not strike us before we can reach the cave."

"Then what will we do, brave Peter?"

"Our good steeds are still fresh, and we will lead the Cossacks a long chase until the storm comes on."

The Cossack captive was a daring and desperate man, and when he conceived an idea he had the strength of purpose enough to put it in force, if possible.

He looked up at the sky also, while he kept saying to himself:

"The snow will come before very long, and I must retard their flight before they reach the wood in the valley."

The Cossacks were not more than fifty yards behind at the time, but they soon fell back again as the black steeds increased their speed.

The cunning Cossack chief endeavored to stay the flight of the fugitives by pulling slyly on the bridle of the horse under him, but those around him struck at the animal with their swords and urged him on down the hill at his best speed.

Failing in his purpose of retarding the flight by pulling on the bridle of his own animal, the Cossack then urged him on, as he cried:

"I crave a word with the leader of the band."

All the members of the Band of Fate were fully aware th

their chief was a young woman, yet they were careful to address her as if she belonged to the opposite sex, and we will follow their example.

Captain Duna drew his steed beside that of the Cossack, as he cried out in reply:

"What do you wish to say to me, Captain Musko?"

"I have a request to make of you."

"What request?"

The daring Cossack sprang suddenly from his own horse and alighted on the back of Captain Duna's steed.

A yell of rage then burst from the other White Bears and old Peter, as they saw their captain flung from the horse out on the snow, while the Cossack forced the black steed on to its fullest speed, as he yelled in defiant tones:

"That will delay your flight, vile traitors."

The dismounted horse dashed on beside the Cossack, and that active rider reached over and seized his bridle at the moment.

The White Bears drew up as if to defend their chief, when he cried to them in stern tones:

"Spur on, spur on, and secure the Cossack. Save your friends, I command you, and you may rescue me afterwards. Spare the Cossack till I deal with him."

The well-trained band spurred on in pursuit of the Cossack, leaving their brave leader at the mercy of the pursuers.

A wild shout of triumph burst from the Cossacks as they witnessed the fall of their chief, and Captain Orloff cried:

"Secure that wretch, and the last file will remain behind to guard him."

The excited young officer then called on the others to press on in the pursuit, crying:

"We will seize all the traitors now, and the escaped prisoners as well."

Six of the Cossacks drew up and surrounded the leader of the Bears, pointing their long lances at him as one of them cried:

"Surrender, dog of a traitor, or we will slay you on the spot!"

Captain Duna flung his sword on the ground, and held up his hands as he quietly replied:

"I surrender."

The White Bears and the old veteran spurred on after the Cossack in the wildest excitement, tall Volga drawing a pistol and aiming at the fugitive as he cried:

"I will shoot the treacherous Cossack!"

"Hold—hold!" cried Don. "Did you not hear our leader call to spare the wretch? We must obey him to the letter."

"But Don is our chief for the present," cried Vistula, "and we must obey him until we rescue our captain."

"Obey Don!" cried the others.

Volga placed his pistol in his belt again and waved his hand to Don as he cried:

"I will spare you, O brave Brother Don, as I know you will spare him to the rescue of our captain."

The young officer then turned his head in turn as he cried:

"We will rescue our captain. Spur on now and take the Cossack alive!"

As they uttered these words of war fell from the sky, and the old veteran cried:

"Follow me now and reach the Cossack, and then to the rescue of our brave captain!"

The Cossack then turned back at the moment, and he saw from the ground from the Don with growing cheer and cheer as they approached further.

"Now, my friends, I have a weapon to encounter the traitors."

The Cossack then led his band to the White Bears.

into the deep-sided valley, when Don drew up beside him with his sword uplifted, crying:

"Draw up on the instant, Captain Musko, or I will strike you on the arms, and disable you for life."

Muttering a fierce imprecation, the Cossack chief pulled up the horses, while the youth from the Don continued, crying:

"I admire you for your dexterity, brave Cossack, but you cannot escape from the Band of Fate."

The snow was falling heavily when the fugitives dashed into the deep wood with their prisoner, and old Peter cried, in joyous tones:

"We will lead them a wild chase now, and I'll cut off my other hand if they track us."

CHAPTER XII.

TO THE RESCUE OF THE CAPTAIN.

The cunning old guide led the fugitives through the paths in the wood, twisting and turning in the flight like a fox baffling the hounds.

Captain Orloff and the Cossacks were able to pursue the White Bears for some time by following the tracks in the snow.

The pursuers soon became bewildered, however, on discovering more tracks than one, and they were at length compelled to retreat to the foot of the mountain, Captain Orloff saying:

"The traitors are hiding in some cave in that wood. We will encamp here and send for reinforcements."

The young officer then sent two of the Cossacks back after the prisoner, saying:

"Take a spare horse with you and bring the prisoner here. Then dispatch three of the men now with the prisoner to the station for a large reinforcement. Make fires and set guards at once."

The active Cossacks were soon riding back for the prisoner, while those who remained behind gathered wood and made fires inside the edge of the forest.

Captain Orloff made himself as comfortable as possible in the snow, muttering to himself:

"Who can the chief of the robbers be, as I am certain that I heard his voice before? I will soon know, however, and then to punish the traitor."

The young officer glanced up at the mountain side every now and then, while he kept meditating as to the identity of the chief of the White Bears, as he kept muttering to himself:

"Why is it that the voice of the traitor reminds me so much of Ruth Jones, when I know that her bones are lying at the bottom of the Duna?"

He perceived the Cossacks coming down the mountain, at length, with their prisoner, and he exclaimed:

"Now we will know who this traitor is. Can it be that it is some relative of the girl's, who has vowed vengeance against me?"

The prisoner's arms were secured when the Cossacks led him down to the camp.

The soldiers from the Don were not very curious, and they did not remove the veil from the prisoner in order to stare at his countenance.

An early snow appeared on Captain Orloff's face as he addressed the White Bears saying:

"Now, my friends, you will rescue the prisoner."

due you. Drag him aside here and tear off that bearish disguise from his head."

Two of the Cossacks seized the bearish head covering, and pulled it up over the prisoner's face.

Captain Orloff then stared at the face thus presented to him, shaking his head as he muttered to himself:

"It is a stranger, as I have never seen that countenance before."

The face thus presented to the young officer was that of a young man who appeared to be about thirty years of age, and it was covered with a heavy dark beard.

Large dark eyelashes overtopped a pair of restless black eyes, the lids of which were opening and closing in a rapid manner, as if affected by the snow.

Another chuckling laugh burst from the prisoner as he glared back at Captain Orloff and inquired:

"Are you much wiser now, Captain Orloff?"

"I am not," was the candid confession.

"Then you do not recognize me?"

"I do not, but you will suffer death in any event."

"Have you the power to put me to death without taking me before the proper authorities?"

A grim smile appeared on the young officer's face as he responded in calm tones, saying:

"I have the power of putting a traitor to death at any moment when I find him in arms against the emperor. Yet I will spare your life now on one condition."

"What is that condition, brave captain?" inquired the captive in sneering tones.

"I will spare your life and promise you to procure your pardon if you guide us to the hiding place of the prisoners you have rescued."

A scornful smile again passed over the prisoner's countenance, and he replied in his defiant tones, saying:

"Proceed with my execution at once then, as I will never betray my dear, innocent friends into the hands of the tyrant. Yet let me give you one word of warning, Captain Orloff."

"I scorn your threats, traitor."

"Scorn them as you will, but I swear to you that you will die within a moment after me. Even at this moment my unseen friends are aiming their deadly weapons at your breast."

Captain Orloff started in affright and sprang behind a tree as he cried out to the Cossacks:

"Drag the prisoner back to the fires, and surround us. Be on the alert, guards, and give the alarm at the first appearance of any of the robbers."

Captain Duna spoke at random in making the threat, yet he uttered the truth.

The brave bears and the old guide had succeeded in stealing away from their prisoners, and they reached a sheltered spot in the wood when Don called a halt and said to them:

"One of you lead the prisoner away and bind him to a tree. Stand guard over him for the present."

The prisoner was led away out of hearing distance, and the youth from the band continued to address his friends, saying:

"Brave brother, we must not delay in reaching our gallant captain, and I have a plan to propose to you."

"Let us hear it, brave Don," responded Vistula, who was a great favorite of the youth.

"I propose that we send the prisoner to the cave and leave him there under the guard of our friends. One of us will be sufficient for that purpose."

"And what are we to do in the meantime?" inquired Volga, who was second in command.

"We will remain out here under the guise of our old brother Don, and be prepared for a bold attempt at rescuing our captain when the best opportunity comes."

The plan proposed was adopted on the instant, and one of the Bears was sent back to the cave with the prisoner with instructions to slay him on the instant if there was any danger of his escaping.

The Bear thus engaged was also instructed to return to the woods as soon as possible, bringing two of the armed serfs with him.

Led on by the old guide, the brave Bears soon tracked the Cossacks to their camping ground, and they were actually pointing their weapons at Captain Orloff when he was threatening to put the prisoner to death.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT A CRITICAL MOMENT.

Captain Orloff soon recovered from the agitation produced by the threatening words of the Bear, but he at once sent out several Cossacks to scour the woods for some distance.

Captain Duna had reason to know that his friends were on the alert, as a signal had been borne to him which was not noticed by those who held him.

The Bears perceived the Cossacks riding out on the scout, and they kept out of their way by retreating around to another spot, from whence they could still observe the movements of the prisoner and his enemies.

The member of the band sent to the cave with the Cossack chief returned to join his companions, while they were thus waiting, and he brought two of the keepers with him.

Don then counted those under him, and he found that he had eight brave men at his command, all of whom had weapons far superior to those used by the Cossacks.

In fact, the Cossacks were not supplied with firearms at the time, as they depended on their long lances in their fiery charges.

The Bears knew that Captain Orloff had sent back to the station for a large reinforcement, and Don had been told that he would be taken for the release of the prisoner before the fresh soldiers appeared on the scene.

As the young fellow perceived the Cossacks dashing about through the wood, he turned to the old guide and said to him:

"Good Peter, would it be very difficult to capture some of the Cossacks without raising an alarm to draw the others on us?"

The old veteran pondered some moments, and then replied, saying:

"That should not be difficult for such brave and active young men."

"Then how would you set about it?"

Pointing to some of the trees around, the old guide responded:

"I would send some of our friends upon them, and they could then drop down on the Cossacks and capture them without giving them time to cry out."

Don nodded in approval, and he then called three of the band together, and gave them certain instructions, while he continued saying:

"We will await you here, and we will hasten to your rescue if necessary."

Vistula, Volga, and the young Pole, who was known as Dasher in the band, were then selected for the dangerous work.

The snow was falling very fast through the leafless trees when the young men set out, and old Peter pointed out to them the trees to be selected from whence they were to pounce on the Cossacks.

A furious wind-storm was blowing at the same time, causing the snow to drift in a dense manner, which enabled the Bears and their friends to conceal themselves from those who were in quest of them.

The young Pole was the first to operate on one of the scouting Cossacks, and he succeeded in dropping on the horse behind the soldier and silencing him before he could make the least outcry.

The Bear then led his prisoner to where his friends awaited him, as he said to Don:

"Here is a horse and a Cossack for you, good brother, and I think we may succeed in capturing many more if that blinding storm lasts."

Don complimented his friend on the success of the first experiment, and then said to him:

"Try it again and two will be your share."

The young Pole hastened away again, saying:

"They say that three is a lucky number, and I will bring in that many if the others do not hasten to secure their share."

Volga appeared soon after with another Cossack and his horse, and he was sent out again to fill up his quota.

Volga appeared soon after with the prisoner and his horse, and he also received the congratulations of the youth who was acting as their leader for the time.

Captain Orloff kept close to the fire during the blinding storm, and the prisoner stood near him in charge of three of the Cossacks.

The young officer kept eyeing the prisoner from time to time, as if striving to remember where he had seen him before, but he could not recall the time or place, while he said to himself:

"The traitor's voice sounded familiar to me at times, and it reminded me of Ruth Jones, yet it must have been a trick of the imagination, as that girl certainly perished in the Duna last night."

Captain Orloff then addressed the prisoner, and demanded: "What reason have you to imagine that your friends are watching us, traitor?"

"Because I know they are."

"I do not believe you, and you said that in order to have your life spared for the time."

"I am not afraid of death, as I know that you are nearer to death than I am," replied the leader of the Bears in brave tones.

Captain Orloff scowled at the prisoner, and drew his sword as if to strike him, as he cried:

"I will have you put to death by the knout when the storm abates a little."

A very scornful smile appeared on the prisoner's face as he laughed, saying:

"The cruel lash will never touch my feet, and I defy you to put me to death."

Captain Orloff became infuriated at the defiance, and he cried to his Cossacks:

"Put the knout on the traitor's feet, and we will have him in a minute."

On receiving the order, one from the foot of the prisoner the Cossack seized a pair of strong boots underneath.

Captain Orloff then turned and cried:

"Put the knout on the wretch to that he cannot move."

At that moment a storm of snow was heard in the wood, and Captain Orloff turned away from the prisoner, crying:

"Watch the entrance of the wood!"

The young officer then led a small band of Cossacks through the forest, and they were soon lost to sight.

The young officer then led a small band of Cossacks through the forest, and they were soon lost to sight.

"Did you see the traitors?" cried Captain Orloff, as the horsemen dashed right close up to the camp-fire where the prisoner was held.

"Yes, we saw them, captain," answered the Cossack who held the spare horse as he made a peculiar motion to the prisoner.

Captain Duna started a little on first hearing the sound of the voice from the wood, and as the horsemen dashed on the scene he said to himself:

"I knew my good friends would not fail me at a critical moment."

At that instant a fierce blast swept against the fires, accompanied by blinding snow.

Captain Orloff turned his back to the blast as he cried out:

"Let half our force go out in search of the traitors when the storm subsides a little."

A yell of rage then burst from the young officer as one of the Cossacks spurred against him and flung him to the ground in the deep snow.

Two other horsemen pushed against the soldiers who were holding the prisoner and hurled them aside also, one of the riders crying:

"We cannot see our hands here, and our steeds are as blind as we are."

One of them saw well enough at the moment, however, to spring from his horse and to cut the cords that bound the prisoner, whispering into his ear at the same time:

"Mount the spare horse, captain, and away with us."

The captain did mount the horse on the instant, and the seven riders dashed away from the fires, their leader crying:

"Captain Orloff, you will not apply the knout to me this day."

Captain Orloff sprang to his feet in the most intense rage, yelling:

"It was a ruse on the part of the traitors to rescue the prisoners. Mount at once, brave Cossacks, and pursue the wretches!"

The Cossacks did mount in haste, while the utmost confusion prevailed among them for some time.

The blinding storm still increased in force, and the horsemen could not proceed through the wood in any order.

Captain Orloff endeavored to force them on, crying:

"The perfidious traitors must have slain some of your companions in order to obtain their horses, and we must on to avenge them."

A yell of rage burst from the Cossacks on hearing the appeal, and they endeavored to force their way through the blinding storm.

The gallant Bears were then pushing on through the wood on their own black steeds, and they were leading the horses captured from the Cossacks.

Captain Duna rode at the head of his men again, while a little in front of him was the old guide, who appeared to know every path even in the blinding storm.

"Can they track us in this snow, Peter?" inquired the captain.

"They cannot, as the drift covers our tracks as soon as they are made."

"Then lead us direct to the cave."

"I will, brave captain, as a rest will serve men and steeds at present."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRISONER AND HIS FRIENDS.

Captain Orloff and the Cossacks were soon lost to sight of the Bears, but their path was discovered by the cunning old guide, who had been captured by the enemy during the storm.

Deeming that it would be impossible to find the Bears without a guide who was well acquainted with the neighborhood, the young officer retreated to the station with his horsemen early in the morning.

Captain Orloff rested during that day, while he gave orders for securing scouts who were well acquainted with the neighboring mountain and the valley beyond.

He had made up his mind to start out with a very strong party on the following day, as he said to himself:

"I dare not go back to the city without securing the escaped prisoners, even though the emperor looks upon me with favor."

About six o'clock that evening the young man calling himself a student, and who had been captured for the second time by the White Bears, rode into the village on one of the splendid black horses.

He was taken at once before Captain Orloff, who addressed him, saying:

"Did you escape again, sir?"

"I had that good fortune, Captain Orloff."

"How did you accomplish it?"

"The White Bears set me free for the time, sir, and here I am to report."

"The White Bears set you free?" exclaimed Captain Orloff in great surprise.

"Yes, Captain Orloff, they set me free on condition that I would come here with a message to you regarding Captain Musko, and then return to them again."

"But you do not intend to do so?"

"I have given them a solemn promise and I must keep my pledge, captain."

"You are a fool; but what is the message sent to me regarding Captain Musko?"

"The captain of the White Bears declares that he will release Captain Musko on one condition."

"What is that, sir?"

"He demands that you will use your influence in releasing a political prisoner whose name will be sent to you hereafter."

"The insolent traitors," growled the young officer. "I will soon put them all to death. And now let me ask you a few questions, sir."

"I am at your service, Captain Orloff."

"Where did the traitors take you to after you were captured the other night?"

"I was taken over the mountain and into a valley on the other side. My eyes were then blindfolded, and I was led along on horseback for several miles."

"But where were you taken to?"

"I was taken to what appeared to me to be a large cellar or cave."

"Did you see Captain Musko there?"

"I did not see Captain Musko from the time I entered the cave until just before leaving it."

"Were you blindfolded also when you were led away from the cave?"

"I was, captain."

"What then?"

"Then I was led through the wood again and over the mountain, and the bandage was not removed from my eyes until we reached a point about two miles from here."

"How many of the traitors were present then?"

"Only one of them, and he awaits my return near the spot where I left him."

Captain Orloff pondered some moments, and then inquired of the young man:

"And you say that you intend to return again to these traitors?"

"I pledged my word to do so, captain, and they proposed

to set me free, and my companions also, when they have accomplished their mission in this neighborhood."

"What is their mission?"

"The setting at liberty of certain political prisoners bound for Siberia."

"Did they mention the name of the prisoner whom they expect me to release?"

"They did not, captain."

"When do you propose to return to the traitors?"

"As soon as possible, captain, with your permission and answer."

"But what if I detain you here now and refuse to allow you to return to the traitors?"

"Then you will compel me to break my word of honor, and one of my dear friends will be put to death as a consequence."

At that moment three sleighs bearing prisoners bound for Siberia arrived at the station, surrounded by a strong guard of mounted men.

Captain Orloff sprang to the door of the tavern on the instant as if to scrutinize the prisoners, and so did the pretended young student.

The young man had scarcely gazed out when he drew back with a slight start and mentally exclaimed:

"Merciful Heaven! is that brave old Doctor Norgo I perceive, and he bound for Siberia? My friends will have work to do tonight, as the good old doctor must be rescued at all hazards."

While the prisoners were being conducted to the guard-room Captain Orloff turned and addressed the young stranger again, saying:

"Will the traitors release Captain Musko on my promising to comply with their request?"

"They will, captain, as they have faith in your honor as a soldier."

"Are you not desirous of punishing the wretches?"

"Certainly I am."

"Then will you not aid me in crushing the vile traitors at once?"

"How can I aid you, captain?"

"By guiding a party under my command to the spot where you left the traitor you speak of."

The young stranger shrugged his shoulders before he remarked:

"That would not avail you, captain, as he would perceive the horsemen and ride away on his fleet steed before you could get near him."

"That may be, sir, yet you could aid us if you are so disposed."

"I am willing to do all in my power, captain, but I should return to my friends this very night and bear your answer back with me."

Captain Orloff appeared to ponder some moments again, while he said to himself:

"Captain Musko would be of great aid in hunting the traitors down, and I will get him released, but I will not help him with the wretches."

Then, speaking aloud he said:

"Ride back to the traitors, sir, and tell them that I accept their proposal. Let them release Captain Musko at once, and I pledge my word of honor to do my utmost in releasing any political prisoner whose name will be sent to me by them hereafter."

"I will depart at once, Captain Orloff, and I am happy to say that none of my friends will be sacrificed on my account."

The young stranger mounted his black horse and rode out of the village, as he intended to do.

The traitors did not fail to hear his promise, for they will soon put him to the test."

On receiving a certain notice the traitors were

into a deep ravine, where six of the Bears and the old guide received him.

Great was the indignation of the brave men when they heard about the old doctor, whom they all loved as they would a father.

"We will put him to the test very soon," said Captain Duna, as he tore off the bearish covering, and then stood before his friends arrayed in the garb of a Cossack chief.

The clever leader had so disguised and changed his countenance as to bear a very close resemblance to Captain Musko.

"It is admirable," cried Volga, "and I believe that even his chosen followers will not detect you."

"Then I will away to put the wretch to the test."

CHAPTER XV.

IN A TRYING POSITION.

As the pretended young student rode away from the station Captain Orloff commenced to ponder over the proposition made to him, while he said to himself:

"Captain Musko is a brave and a cunning man, and if he is released he will be able to guide us to the den of the traitors."

The treacherous young officer had no intention of carrying out his part of the agreement, unless he could thereby hope to insure the arrest of all the White Bears, and the escaped prisoners as well.

While he was thus meditating a tall man, wrapped up in furs, entered the station and addressed the young officer in very respectful tones, saying:

"I have just arrived from St. Petersburg, Captain Orloff, and I have been sent by the chief of police there to consult with you."

As the man spoke he threw aside the furs that covered him, and the young officer recognized him as he sprang to his feet, exclaiming:

"You are welcome, Ulric, as you are the very man I want here at present."

The police agent bowed and smiled while he responded, saying:

"The chief in the city thought that I may be of service to you, captain, and he bids me inform you that the emperor expects us to capture and punish those traitors who have recently dared to meddle with his prisoners, and that we must also secure the prisoners again."

Captain Orloff frowned a little and then inquired:

"Have you received any definite instructions in the affair, Ulric?"

"I have, captain."

"May I hear them?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then he listened and proceeded:

The police agent or spy then commenced, saying:

"For some time past I have been detailed to watch the house of a certain old citizen residing in the city, who has been reported of having communication with several traitors who have been sent to Siberia."

"May I ask the name of that old person?"

"He is known as Dr. Norgo."

The young officer started slightly on hearing the name and then remarked:

"Then I presume you know, Ulric, that he is now at the station as a prisoner on his way to Siberia?"

"I am aware of that, captain, as it was I who caused his arrest on receiving certain tidings about the escape of Count Metski and his daughter."

"But what could the old doctor have to do with the release of the prisoners?" inquired the young officer.

"It is suspected that he had a good deal to do with it. Count Metski and Dr. Norgo are old friends. During the last few weeks Dr. Norgo had received several visitors at his house at night, many of whom were strangers in the city."

"But you must be aware, Ulric, that Dr. Norgo lectures to medical students three nights in the week. I had a young friend who attended those lectures."

"May I ask his name?" inquired the spy.

"Yes. He is the son of Count Metski and he is known as Conrad, a handsome young Pole, who was a great favorite at court before his father fell into disgrace with the emperor."

The police spy nodded while the young officer was speaking, and he then inquired:

"Do you know that Conrad Metski has mysteriously disappeared since the arrest of his father and sister, and that the police in the city cannot find a single trace of him, captain?"

"I was not aware of that."

"It is the truth, however."

The spy then went on to give further information about the disappearance of other young men, and Captain Orloff responded by telling of the capture of the seven young students by the traitors who had released the prisoners bound for Siberia.

He also told about the appearance of the young stranger at the station that night, and the proposition made by him from the outlaws known as the Seven White Bears.

The police agent listened in the most attentive manner, and then inquired:

"And do you expect that they will release the Cossack chief as proposed, captain?"

"I do. I would not be at all surprised to see Captain Musko here to-night with a communication to me naming the prisoner whom they expect my aid in releasing."

"Then we will see and judge better when we know the name of the person they expect you to release," said the police spy. "Now I wish to state to you that we have a deep design in sending Dr. Norgo as a prisoner to Siberia."

"What is your design then, Ulric?"

"It is this: If the old doctor is implicated with the traitors who have rescued the prisoners, they will also make a desperate effort at releasing him. Contrary to the general rule, the authorities in the city made no secret about the arrest of Dr. Norgo, so that the traitors out this way may know that he is on the way to Siberia, and be invited to attempt his release."

"I understand," responded the young officer. "Then we may expect that the traitors will seek to rescue the old doctor this very night, or at the next station to-morrow night?"

"That is the opinion of my chief, and I am sent with the prisoner, Captain Orloff, to aid you in capturing the traitors and retaking all the prisoners rescued by them."

At that moment a horseman rode up to the door of the station, and then a loud, hoarse voice was heard outside, crying:

"Where can I find Captain Orloff?"

The sentry at the door replied:

"Captain Orloff is in here, sir."

"Then announce to him that Captain Musko, chief of a tribe of Cossacks, would like to see him on the instant on important business."

Captain Orloff cast a significant glance at the police spy as he sprang to his feet, crying:

"Admit Captain Musko on the instant!"

The sentry at the door drew aside, and the Cossack chief strode into the station, and took the young officer, as he cried:

"I am happy to announce to you, Captain Orloff, that I have been released by the traitors, who had me as a prisoner, and they have sent just a communication which I now hand to you."

The young officer congratulated the Cossack chief on his release, and he exchanged another significant glance with the police agent before opening the letter handed to him.

On perusing the communication Captain Orloff started a little, and he then drew the police agent aside, while he said to him in subdued tones:

"It is just as you predicted, as the traitors expect me to release old Dr. Norgo in return for their setting Captain Musko here at liberty."

The police agent smiled in approval, and then glanced at the Cossack chief, as he inquired:

"Can we confide in him?"

"Certainly, as he must be embittered against the rascals after suffering defeat and imprisonment at their hands, and he will be willing to aid us in any plot that we may form against them."

Captain Orloff then hastened to introduce the police agent to the Cossack chief, and continued, saying:

"I presume, Captain Musko, that you are more than anxious to be avenged on the traitors who attempted to humiliate you so much?"

A terrible scowl appeared on the face of the Cossack as he responded in very hoarse tones, saying:

"I will not rest until I ride against the villains with my lancers and put them all to death."

Being thus assured of the hearty co-operation of the vengeful Cossack chief, Captain Orloff and the police spy consulted freely with him about the destruction of the White Bears through the agency of the old doctor.

The Cossack chief entered into the scheme with great spirit, saying:

"It is true that the wretches blindfolded me until I was within about a league of the station here, yet I think that I can track them to their den if you release the doctor, as some of them will be certain to be lying in wait for him in the neighborhood to-night."

Captain Orloff and the police agent agreed to the proposition, when it was decided to release the old doctor very soon, and then riding on his trail with all the pursuing force of horsemen, led on by the guides already chosen for the enterprise.

The three men had just entered the station when another loud voice was heard, crying:

"Where can I find the commander of the station?"

The Cossack chief started a little on hearing the voice, and then drew toward the door as he muttered to himself:

"I am in a dangerous position now, as that is Captain Musko. How could the Cossack chief escape from the cave again when I gave such strict orders to have him watched over?"

While the pretended Cossack chief was thus muttering to himself, Captain Orloff and the police spy were moving to the door also.

Then from the station burst the real Cossack chief, arrayed in the splendid uniform of a general, and with his eyes flashing a terrible manner as he addressed Captain Orloff, saying:

"I am Captain Musko, though you may not recognize me in this uniform, and I have just escaped from the infernal prison where they held me to this point."

Captain Orloff and the police agent looked at the real Cossack chief with some surprise, and the young officer then turned and addressed the pretended chief, saying:

"I suppose this is the man who has been waiting for you in the neighborhood to-night."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COSSACKS MUST DECIDE.

Staring at the pretender with flashing eyes, the real Cossack chief turned to Captain Orloff and demanded:

"Who is this impostor?"

Before the young officer could reply the daring impostor sprang forward and confronted the speaker in stern and haughty tones, crying:

"Vile wretch, how dare you assert in my presence that you are Captain Musko?"

The real Cossack chief danced with rage for a few moments, and then clenched his hands and sprang at the other as he yelled:

"Vile impostor, I will tear your false tongue out from the root and then have you put to death."

The two men clenched for a moment, and then the disguised chief of the White Bears flung his assailant to the ground with great force as he cried:

"Hand me your weapon, Captain Orloff, and I will slay the wretch on the instant."

While thus speaking the disguised leader sprang at the young officer and drew the weapon from the scabbard before the other could prevent him.

He then sprang at the prostrate Cossack chief as if about to plunge the weapon into his breast when the police agent caught his arm and drew him back, crying:

"Do not slay the wretch just yet, Captain Musko, as it is necessary for us to question him before we punish him as he deserves."

A file of soldiers was called into the station by Captain Orloff, and they hastened to seize the Cossack chief.

The man thus arrested became furious with rage, and he turned and addressed Captain Orloff in violent tones, crying:

"Captain Orloff, this is a fearful outrage on me, and I will call you to an account for it hereafter. Summon some of the officers under my command and they will recognize me. Bring in better lights, and you yourself will perceive that that wretch is a vile impostor."

A dim light was only burning in the station at the time, and Captain Orloff could not scrutinize the features of the two men very carefully.

The police agent was a very clever man, and he began to realize that something was wrong.

Turning to Captain Orloff, he remarked in whispered tones:

"I cannot perceive what object that fellow could have in coming here and asserting that he is Captain Musko and in denouncing the other."

The young officer was beginning to suspect their first visitor also, and he responded, saying:

"Then would it not be well to summon some of Captain Musko's followers and let them decide which is their real chief, as they do bear a close resemblance to each other?"

"That will be the best plan."

The young officer then gave orders, and some of the principal officers under the Cossack chief were summoned.

Seven of the leading Cossacks who had served under the real chief were called into the station, when Captain Orloff addressed them, saying:

"These two men both call on this officer and then on that officer, and they both tell us which of them is Captain Musko?"

The Cossacks at once asked the pretender in the most hostile manner, and of them came:

"That is our chief."

"Then you are not that, you false wretch!" cried the real Cossack chief, in hoarse and stern tones.

The Cossack who had spoken started and stared at the prisoner, and he then advanced toward him with the others as he cried:

"This is wonderful, as the man here has spoken in the voice of our chief."

"He is an impostor!" cried the pretender, "and I charge you, Jason, to denounce him as such, and to declare that I am your real chief."

On being thus addressed by his own name in a voice so much like that of his real chief, the Cossack turned and bent his knee before the pretender, crying:

"This is our great chief, Captain Musko, and that wretch is an impostor."

A yell of rage burst from the prisoner, and he cried out in furious tones:

"Jason, you base wretch, I'll have you put to death for having denied me. Is it thus you repay me for saving your life when the Turk was about to slay you on that terrible day on the banks of the Danube?"

On being thus appealed to, the Cossack turned and glared at his real chief again, while the pretender continued to address him, crying:

"Turn not away from your true chief, Jason, as was it not I who saved your life two years ago when the ice gave way under you in our own river Don?"

The puzzled Cossack turned to the pretender again and answered saying:

"That is true, brave chief; but can you mention the name of the maiden who dragged us both out on that day?"

The pretender smiled in a confident manner, and then replied, saying:

"Why should I not, when it was my own fair cousin, Ruth Jones, the granddaughter of the great American admiral who fought for Catherine of Russia against the Turks a long time ago."

Jason bowed before the pretender as he answered, saying:

"This is our real chief, and that other wretch is an impostor."

The other wretch growled aloud and then cried in hostile tones:

"Oh, Jason, Jason, you miserable fool, it was I who saved your life in the Don, and it was my cousin, Ruth Jones, who dragged us both out when we were almost perished with the cold."

Captain Orloff was watching the two men with the deepest interest, and he then addressed the pretender as he earnestly inquired:

"Was Ruth Jones your cousin, Sir?"

"Yes, was, captain."

"Can you tell me if she lives yet?"

"She does not."

"What has become of her, then?"

"She disappeared from her home on the banks of the Don one evening over a year ago, and it is supposed that she was cruelly put to death by a young stranger who was then in love with her."

Captain Orloff trembled a little and then inquired:

"Did you know that young stranger?"

"I never saw him, but I hope to meet him some day and through the path of my sword."

"And so do I," said the real Captain Musko, "for I have lost during these my life."

The police agent had been watching the two men with the deepest interest.

He drew down Captain Orloff aside and whispered to him:

"I believe that the last owner of the real Captain Musko,

and I also believe that our first visitor is related to him in some way."

"I cannot agree with you, Ulric, as I believe that our first visitor is the real Captain Musko."

The able detective shook his head and then continued in his whispered tones, saying:

"Then act on your own convictions, and I will keep a watch on the first comer."

"What would you have me do, then?"

"Let the man held as a prisoner be led away and we will treat the other as the real Captain Musko for the present."

"What is your object in doing that, Ulric, if you believe that he is an impostor?"

"I wish to prove to you that he is by exposing him very soon. We must carry out our plot with him by releasing the old doctor and then keeping on the track of each of them."

The young officer agreed to the plan proposed, and the unfortunate Cossack chief was led away as a prisoner, while he kept denouncing the pretender and Captain Orloff, as well as his own followers.

The pretender was watching Captain Orloff and the police agent also, while he said to himself:

"That wolf from the city suspects me, and he is setting a trap for me. I must act promptly for the release of the old doctor, as I am certain to be detected by the Cossacks in the daylight."

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN ORLOFF IS STARTLED.

The prisoner was led out of the station by the soldiers and the Cossacks.

Captain Orloff and the police agent then continued to treat the impostor as if they were perfectly convinced that he was the real Captain Musko.

The question of releasing old Dr. Norgo was again resumed, and the police spy then left the apartment, saying:

"I will go and release the old doctor without betraying myself to the soldiers."

Captain Orloff was very uneasy when left alone with the Cossack chief, with whom he continued to converse in the most friendly manner.

Making an excuse that he had to look after his men, the young officer left the apartment, saying:

"I will be back with you very soon again, captain, and I request you to remain here for the present."

"But can I not go to my own men?" inquired the pretended Cossack chief in dignified tones.

"Certainly, brave captain, after I have had a consultation with you regarding those traitors."

When the young officer hastened out he also gave instructions to some of the soldiers under his command, and a double watch was set on the pretender.

The daring captain of the White Bears did not appear to be at all alarmed in that trying position, although he soon discovered that he was being watched over in the closest manner.

He also discovered that the sentinels outside the door were instructed to keep him in the apartment until the return of Captain Orloff.

Remaining in the apartment on being refused permission to leave the apartment, the daring leader said to himself:

"All I can have a hint to good old Do. Norgo, all will be well yet."

When Captain Orloff returned to the apartment which seemed to him

Headquarters, he made his way to the guard-house where the Cossack chief was confined.

That cunning man had become much calmer, and he received the young officer with a smile, saying:

"I cannot blame you, Captain Orloff, for the treatment I have received, as I can now perceive that the wretch who has imposed on you is a very able actor, and he must be very familiar with my former history. In truth, I believe he is a relative of mine, although I cannot imagine at present who the wretch may be."

The man spoke in such earnest tones that the young officer was almost led to believe that the police agent was correct, and he then commenced to question the prisoner as to his movements since the night when he was taken prisoner.

The Cossack chief gave a correct account of his capture on that night and of his escape and recapture in the morning.

He then went on and told of his last escape.

"Did you take particular notice of the locality of the cave?" asked Captain Orloff.

"I did, and I can guide you to the spot even in the darkness."

Captain Orloff put a number of other questions to the Cossack chief, which were answered satisfactorily, and then the captain questioned him about his dead cousin, Ruth Jones.

The Cossack chief smiled and replied in sad tones, saying:

"Ah, my dear cousin was a most beautiful woman, and she was highly accomplished also. Her father went to St. Petersburg soon after Ruth disappeared, and it is said that he was in search of the young wretch who put her out of the way. Information came to me on the night before my capture that Ruth's father was dead, and that he had been made away with secretly by the wretch who caused the death of the dear young lady. While I hate those White Bears for acting as traitors to the emperor, I feel that I could strike with them if they assumed the infernal villain who has caused the death of my relatives."

Captain Orloff shuddered, and then the two men were silent for some moments, and the Cossack chief sighed again as he thought of the fair cousin whom he mourned as dead.

A sudden inspiration then appeared to seize on him, as his face became intensely agitated, and his cunning eyes flashed with a peculiar light, while he muttered to himself:

"Could it be possible that she is alive still, and that she would play such a trick on me? I cannot imagine any other person who could do it so well, and she did personate me in early days to punish me when I forced my love on her too much."

The young officer heard the muttered words, and his countenance became intensely excited also, while he eagerly demanded:

"Of whom are you speaking?"

The Cossack chief was on his guard, and he bent his head upon his breast without answering the question put to him, as he said to himself:

"It may be possible that she is still alive, and I want to see that man and hold a private consultation with him before I open my lips again."

The cunning Cossack chief then addressed Captain Orloff in calm tones, and said:

"I request a private interview with the man who now represents himself as Captain Musko, and I then promise to expose him or to swear that I am the pretender."

Captain Orloff pondered a few moments over the proposition, and he then consented to the chief of the guardhouse to withdraw a short distance away.

"I will hear what they have to say through the closet, and then I will solve the mystery."

The Cossack chief appeared to be satisfied at this arrangement. He went, yet he turned back when the soldiers led him

away, and his head fell on his breast again while he said to himself:

"It cannot be possible, and yet what other human being could thus personate me?"

Captain Orloff followed after the prisoner, and when they reached the house where the pretender was being watched over, the young officer cried:

"Admit the prisoner alone to interview the Cossack officer."

The prisoner entered the apartment and advanced toward the pretended Cossack chief, while Captain Orloff gave some orders to the soldiers outside the door.

The young officer then slipped into an adjoining house, as he said to himself:

"I will hear what they have to say through the closet, and then I will solve the mystery."

The pretender arose from the fire on perceiving the Cossack chief entering the apartment, and addressed him in dignified tones, saying:

"Who sent you here?"

The Cossack chief bent his piercing eyes on the pretender, and answered in calm tones:

"I came here to confess to you that I am not Captain Musko, and to claim your mercy."

The pretender was a little startled at the speech, and he stared at the cunning Cossack chief as he said:

"Who are you, then?"

The real Captain Musko cast a cautious glance around and then advanced and exclaimed in subdued but thrilling tones:

"I am your cousin, Ruth Jones, who was supposed to have been drowned in the Don over a year ago. Ha! I see that I startle you now, brave Cossack."

The pretended Cossack chief was startled at the assertion thus made; and so was Captain Orloff, who was listening in the closet that communicated with the apartment through the adjoining house.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BOLD STROKE PROPOSED.

Captain Orloff was so startled on hearing the announcement made by the real Cossack chief that he staggered in the closet and made a noise that was overheard by each of the persons to whom he was listening.

The disguised chief of the White Bears was amazed at the announcement made by the Cossack, yet he was cautious enough, on hearing the noise, to draw back from the man as he remarked aloud:

"The rats are making an uproar in the corner, and we had better draw nearer this window, or they will interrupt us again."

Captain Duna led the way to the window, still keeping up the dignified bearing of a Cossack chief, and the other followed in an humble manner while he said to himself:

"By all that's mysterious, it is my cousin Ruth herself, and what can be her object in coming here in that disguise? She must be in league with the traitors known as the Seven White Bears."

Captain Orloff felt that he was deceived, and he stepped out of the closet and into the cool air outside the building, while he gasped forth beneath his breath:

"Can it be possible that the prisoner is no other than Ruth Jones herself?"

The smiling young officer then peered in at the door, and he perceived the prisoner and the pretended Cossack chief conversing in low but earnest tones.

Captain Musko kept staring at the prisoner for a few min-

ments, and the other kept blinking his eyes as if to hide them from his earnest gaze.

The real Cossack chief then looked down at Captain Duna's hand, from which he had removed a rough glove on seizing the young officer's sword.

That one glance satisfied him that he was dealing with the dead girl or her spirit, and the wild Cossack chief's eyes glistened with agitation as he stared at the pretender again and gasped forth:

"I am satisfied now, and I am willing to die in order to serve you."

"What are you satisfied about?" demanded Captain Duna, as he hastened to pull the glove over his hand.

"That you are my adored cousin—Ruth Jones. Oh, command me, my beloved one, and I will serve you to the death and become a traitor for your sake."

"Mad wretch, you have lost your wits, and you do not know what you are saying."

At that moment Captain Orloff strode into the apartment and addressed the puzzled prisoner, crying:

"Your interview must close now. Do you still declare that you are Captain Musko?"

The Cossack chief cast one imploring glance at the pretender and then replied to the young officer in very humble tones:

"Do with me as you will, captain, as I now declare that this man is Captain Musko, and I am but a vile impostor."

"Then who are you?" demanded Captain Orloff.

"I am that officer's cousin, and I was born near him on the banks of the Don."

Captain Orloff stared from one to the other, and he was about to address the prisoner, when an alarm cry rose outside and Detective Ulric rushed into the apartment, crying:

"The Siberian prisoner known as Doctor Norgo has escaped from the guard-house."

Captain Orloff ran to the door with the detective to give orders for the pursuit, when Captain Duna touched the Cossack chief on the shoulder and said to him in subdued tones:

"You will be put to death if you remain here now, so follow me."

The active Bear then made a dash for the back window.

Pushing it open, he sprang out into the snow and darted around to where his horse was standing.

On turning his head he perceived that the active Cossack chief was following him, and he said to himself:

"Poor Musko is faithful to me, and I must serve him in turn."

The black steed was standing in front of the station, and by his side stood the good horse on which the Cossack chief had reached the village.

Captain Orloff heard the two men rushing to the window, and he darted out after them, crying:

"Seize the Cossack chief, as he is the impostor, and do not let the other escape."

Captain Duna was in the act of springing on his black horse, when the Cossack chief sprang to his side and whispered into his ear:

"Dash toward the Cossacks who are stationed to the left, and they will protect you."

"Will you come with me?" inquired Captain Duna as he sprang on the animal's back.

"Yes, I will follow you to the death, and I will shield you with my own body, as I saw the mark on your hand, and I know you now."

The two chiefs then dashed away on the fleet steed, and after them rode the police agent and his followers, together with several of the mounted police led on by Captain Orloff.

The old doctor was flying in the same direction at the mo-

ment, but he was on foot, and he could not make much headway in the deep snow.

The cunning police agent had so arranged the escape of the old man as to have two of his own faithful aids following in his track.

The two horsemen soon dashed up on those who were following the old doctor, and they were nearing the camp of the Cossacks at the same time.

Dashing by the police agents, Captain Duna perceived the old doctor ahead of him, and he raised his voice, crying: "I ride to seize the prisoner."

The old doctor recognized the voice, and he turned in surprise to stare at the horseman who was dashing at him, as he said to himself:

"It is brave Captain Duna coming to my rescue."

The Cossack chief was close behind the White Bear, and he was passing the camp of his own lancers at the moment.

Raising his voice he yelled aloud in warlike tones:

"Brave Cossacks of the Don, charge out and assail those who are pursuing your chief."

The Cossacks rushed out from their tents almost on the instant, and turned to oppose those who were pursuing the two horsemen.

When Captain Duna rode to the old doctor's side he held down his hand as he said to him:

"Brave old friend, get up behind me, as the good horse will bear us both."

The active old doctor did not hesitate on springing on the horse, as he replied:

"I trust our friends are near with a spare animal."

Wild shouts and cries were then heard behind them, as the Cossacks attacked the police agents and the soldiers, and drove them back for the time.

The fugitives dashed on, the Cossack chief keeping in the rear as he said to himself:

"I am a traitor to the emperor, but I now know that I serve Ruth Jones, and I will follow her to the death."

Captain Duna stared back at the Cossack chief, and then addressed the old doctor, saying:

"I think we have gained a new recruit to-night, doctor."

"Who is it, my dear young friend?"

"A chief of a tribe of Cossacks from the Don."

"Was he not the man who persecuted you in your own home?"

"He was, but he has served me well to-night, and I think he will aid us now in our good work."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OLD DOCTOR'S GREAT SCHEME.

Great was the rejoicing among the White Bears when Captain Duna passed in among them on the black horse with the old doctor behind him.

They were very much surprised, also, on seeing the Cossack chief ride in as a willing captive.

While the old doctor was mounting the spare horse, the chief of the White Bears addressed his band, saying:

"Brave friends, I bring you a new recruit in an old enemy. Captain Musko has served me to-night in a very brave manner, and in doing so he has placed himself liable to be put to death as a traitor."

A murmur of applause arose from the band, and then young Don cried:

"Then we will receive Captain Musko as a brother."

Old Peter, the guide, was standing in an elevated position, with his eyes turned toward the village at the moment, and he sprang on his horse, saying:

"A large troop of horsemen ride this way, brave captain, and we should away."

"Then away with us, brave friends," cried Captain Duna.

The old guide did ride away up the mountain, and on after him followed the White Bears and the late prisoners.

When the Cossacks sallied out from their tents at the cry of their chief, Captain Orloff was dismayed on perceiving the lancers charging against his own followers.

A brief struggle ensued before the keen-witted detective from the city called a truce, crying:

"Brave Cossacks of the Don, you have been betrayed by a traitor who pretends to be your chief. We are in pursuit of that traitor and a prisoner who has just escaped from the prison."

Hurried explanations then ensued, and the puzzled Cossacks agreed to ride in pursuit of the fugitives with those whom they had assailed.

The mounted guides previously selected were also employed to lead the pursuers.

Captain Orloff then found himself at the head of over two hundred horsemen, all of whom were most eager to capture the two men who had represented themselves as Captain Musko, and to explain the mystery.

On moving through the deep wood the guides could still perceive the footprints of the fugitives' horses in the snow, but they were soon confounded by perceiving that the tracks crossed each other in great confusion.

A halt was then called, and the guides were sent out with strong escorts for the purpose of finding the last track made by the White Bears on leaving the wood for their rendezvous.

In the meantime the fugitives reached their cave in safety, and the good old doctor was warmly welcomed by the other escaped prisoners.

After making arrangements to guard against a surprise, the captain of the Bears drew the Cossack chief into one of the apartments in the cave, and said to him:

"Cousin Musko, I will not now deny who I am, but I have no time for explanations with you, as my friends are about to hold an important meeting."

The leader of the Band of Fate was wearing his bearish disguise at the time, and the Cossack chief seized one of the hands and pressed it to his lips, as he exclaimed:

"My dear cousin, will you forgive me for persecuting you, as I swear to you that I was mad in my former conduct."

"What is that, dear cousin?"

"You will swear to me that you will never speak to me of love again. I live only for vengeance and for defeating the emperor who put my father to death, and I will have no thought of love hereafter."

"I will swear to anything you desire if you will only allow me to be one of your faithful followers hereafter, dear cousin."

"That will be for your band may decide, but I now warn you to be careful of the traitor as Captain Duna."

"Captain Duna, I will follow you and guard you in every way. But will you not tell me the name of the traitor who betrayed you?"

"Will you please to be patient, and not believe what I say until I have been able to consult with my friends?"

"I will be patient, but I must know the name of the traitor who betrayed you, and I must know the name of the traitor who betrayed you."

"I will be patient, but I must know the name of the traitor who betrayed you, and I must know the name of the traitor who betrayed you."

now, as we may be discovered here and forced to fly very soon."

The old doctor arose on the instant and addressed his friends, saying:

"Brave brothers of the Band of Fate, I have to inform you that the police in St. Petersburg are on the alert, and we find it impossible to send out a second party."

"The scheme that I propose is a very daring one, indeed. War is about to be declared by the emperor against Turkey, and it is firmly believed that the French and English will side with the Turks in the great struggle. In that event, all good Russians will not dream of doing anything to weaken their government, and yet, at the same time, we must restrict the tyrant in persecuting innocent victims who incur his displeasure or the enmity of his favorites."

"By seizing the emperor's son and heir and confining him in a secret prison that I have prepared we may do this. Then we will inform the tyrant that his son will be put to death if he continues to persecute our innocent brothers by death and exile to Siberia."

A shout of approval burst from the Bears and their friends on hearing the daring proposition, and then Captain Duna cried out, in excited tones:

"Noble doctor, the daring proposition is worthy of you, and I pledge myself to carry it out. Will you all aid me, brave brothers?"

The other White Bears raised their swords on the instant, as they responded as if with one voice, crying:

"We will, we will, brave captain!"

The old guide rushed into the apartment at the moment and addressed the leader of the band, crying:

"Brave captain, the wolves are on our track, as they have discovered the path leading from the wood, and they will be on us very soon."

"Then out with the sleigh and we will ride away as soon as possible."

In less than five minutes after the fugitives were moving away from the cave.

Count Metski, the old doctor, and the two young ladies rode in the sleigh, which was driven by old Peter, and the Cossack chief and Mort Dearing traveled on horseback with the White Bears.

The three keepers of the bloodhounds rode on ahead, leading three spare horses.

CHAPTER XX.

AT WORK IN THE CITY.

Two nights after the escape of the old doctor, a horseman rode into St. Petersburg at full speed.

That horseman was Detective Ulric, and he was making his way to the office of the chief of police.

The weary man staggered as he dismounted from his horse, and the animal trembled with fatigue.

Only pausing to drink a glass of wine on entering the building, the active detective sought an interview with his chief and made his report, which he concluded by saying in dejected tones:

"I confess, sir, that I have failed in my duty, and I return myself for punishment. I have tracked them, but at the first station hence on the way to Moscow, and they have escaped. They were on the coast of the Black Sea, and I have returned to the city, empty-handed."

"Could it be that the fugitives got away by sea?"

assert that no human being could pursue them with more energy than I have put forth."

"And yet they baffled you, Ulric?"

"I confess it, sir, and I deserve punishment; but yet I would claim one favor at your hands."

"What do you claim?"

"I claim permission to be left at liberty to pursue the wretches for one more week, and then I will bow to any punishment you may order if I do not crush them."

"And did you not see anything of the young students in the cave where the traitors had been hiding?"

"We did not, sir."

A private bell on the chief's desk sounded at the moment, and he turned to the detective, saying:

"Await in the next room, as this is a visitor on important business."

When the detective disappeared in the next room the chief answered the bell by speaking through a tube, and inquired:

"Who desires to see me now?"

"Young Count Torloff, who has just returned to the city with his companions."

The chief of police started on hearing the name, as the young gentleman just mentioned was one of the students who had been captured by the White Bears, and he then spoke through the tube, saying:

"Admit Count Torloff at once."

A handsome young gentleman in the garb of a student soon entered the private office and bowed to the chief, saying:

"Noble chief, I am here to report to you about the traitors who assailed us and robbed us on the road to the Ural mountains."

"When did you escape from the robbers?"

"Two nights ago, sir. On that evening I was released by the wretches with my companions, and we have since been traveling here as fast as we could proceed."

The chief of police then put several questions to the young man regarding the White Bears, all of which were answered in the most satisfactory manner.

Count Torloff was then dismissed, and Detective Ulric entered the private office again.

The chief gave the detective a brief but clear account of the adventures of the student as related by his late visitor, to all of which the detective listened with the deepest interest.

The young visitor was known to the chief and was said to be a brave and noble man who was high in favor with Prince Alexander, the favorite son of the emperor and the heir to the throne.

The chief then told the detective the story of the capture of the student, and how he had been captured by the seven white bears.

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Ulric was refreshed enough to take up the trail on the second night, and he kept a strict watch on the movements of the suspected young student.

In the meantime Captain Orloff arrived at St. Petersburg, and reported in person to the emperor concerning the bold actions of the Seven White Bears.

The merciless tyrant was fearfully enraged on hearing about the release of his victims, and he sent for the chief of police, with whom he held a long consultation.

Detective Ulric continued to keep watch on young Count Torloff, while Captain Orloff and the chief of police were empowered and commanded to make strict search for the traitors and the fugitives in the city and in the neighborhood.

Six days after the return of the detective, the young count and Prince Alexander left the palace in a sleigh to attend a ball given by a wealthy nobleman at his palace on the banks of the Neva.

The young men left the palace about eight o'clock in the evening, and the detective followed them in another sleigh.

On reaching a point about five miles from the city, seven white figures on black horses suddenly dashed out from behind a large wall and attacked the sleigh containing Prince Alexander and Count Torloff.

The detective perceived the attack, and he pushed forward on the instant to assist Prince Alexander against his assailants.

Before he could arrive on the scene, however, the sleigh containing the prince and his companion, together with the Seven White Bears, disappeared behind the high wall.

Detective Ulric found the driver of the sleigh lying half senseless in the snow, but the man could not give any clue as to the whereabouts of the prince and his companion.

The active detective then traced the missing sleigh and the horsemen to a narrow road leading down to the frozen river, where all traces of the daring riders and their prisoners disappeared.

After searching in vain for more than two hours, Detective Ulric hastened back to the city to report to his chief.

The chief of police then hastened to report to the emperor, who became more furious than ever at the treatment of his favorite son.

The tyrant became calmer after some time, however, and he turned to the chief of police, saying:

"Keep this affair a secret for the present, as it must not be known that the heir to the throne has been thus assailed and borne away within a few miles of our capital."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BEARS AND THEIR PRISONER.

Prince Alexander was a brave, stalwart young man at that time, and he was much given to the amusements of the great city.

The young men traveled without an escort, and they did not even have weapons wherewith to defend themselves when the Seven White Bears dashed out at them and stopped the sleigh, taking both young noblemen prisoners, and knocking the driver half-senseless from the sleigh.

The whole movement was effected in such a rapid manner that the daring fellows reached the frozen river with their prisoners just as the vigilant detective drove up to the spot where the half-senseless driver was lying.

On reaching the river the two young men were blindfolded, and the sleigh driver was found lying senseless on the ground. The two young men found shelter in what appeared to be a deserted old building on the bank of the river.

When Prince Alexander was permitted to use his eyes again,

he found himself in a large apartment, the walls of which appeared to be damp and musty.

In the center of the apartment stood a square table, around which six of the White Bears were seated.

At each end of the long table stood two chairs, into one of which the prisoner was forced, while the chief of the band took the seat in front of him, crying:

"Prince Alexander, you are now in the power of the patriotic band known as the Seven White Bears. Do you wish to know why you have been brought here?"

"I should refuse to converse with such wretches, yet I will answer you by saying that I do wish to know your purpose in thus assaulting the heir to the throne of Russia."

"It is because you are the heir to the throne of Russia that you are thus treated," answered the leader of the band. "Did you not hear of the recent exploits of our band?"

"I have heard that you rescued some prisoners on their way to Siberia, but why you should thus assail me I cannot imagine."

"Then we will be candid with you, prince. Your father has either killed or banished to Siberia some of our nearest and dearest friends. We could take his life if we so desired, but we are patriotic Russians, and we do not desire to strike a blow at our country by killing the emperor when he is about to engage in a great war. We know that the present emperor loves you better than his own life, and we propose to strike at him through you."

"By putting me to death?"

"By putting you to death, if necessary. If that act does not terrify your cruel father into granting us liberal terms, we will seize your brother also and put him to death."

"What concessions do you demand?"

"We demand a fair trial for all those unfortunates who are arrested and put to death or sent to Siberia for crimes that are only known to the emperor and his vile agents."

"Is that all you require?"

"It is not. We require a full pardon for all the prisoners who have recently escaped from his agents while on their way to Siberia, as well as for those who have aided in their escape."

"Anything more, moderate traitors?"

"Yes, there is something more, and it concerns yourself very much."

"What do you require of me?"

"We require you to take a solemn oath to the effect that you will liberate or set free all the serfs in Russia when you ascend to the throne on the death of your cruel father."

"Why not make such a demand on the emperor now?" demanded the young prince with another sneer.

"Because we do not expect or desire that such a great movement could be carried out while the emperor is on the eve of a great war with three powerful nations. If he does not grant what we ask when the war is over he will cease to exist, and you will ascend to the throne only on condition that you will grant freedom to your unfortunate countrymen now held in bondage, and full justice to all citizens as well."

"And what if my father refuses to comply with your very moderate request?"

"If he does refuse we will first send him your left hand, on the finger of which he will recognize the signet ring now worn by you."

The brave young prince trembled a little and glanced at his left hand, but he turned aside and then demanded:

"And what if he should then refuse?"

"We will send him your right hand."

"And if he should still refuse?"

"We will then send him your head, in the mouth of which a communication will appear telling your father that your head will meet him the same day."

The captain of the band spoke in such thrilling tones that the brave young prince shuddered again.

"What do you expect me to do?" inquired the prisoner.

"We expect you to send a communication to your father, by a messenger, advising him to comply with our terms, or else we will send him your left hand by a special messenger this very night."

CHAPTER XXII.

FACING THE TYRANT.

About eleven o'clock that night young Count Torloff rode up to the palace of the emperor at full gallop, and he was mounted on one of the horses driven under the sleigh which had borne the young prince away from the city.

The young man was instantly admitted and led into the presence of the emperor.

The old tyrant advanced to meet the young count as he eagerly demanded:

"What of my son?"

"He is a prisoner in the hands of the White Bears, sire, and here is a communication from him."

Nicholas tore open the letter handed to him, and a terrible frown appeared on his face as he perused it.

Speaking in furious tones, he then addressed the young count, crying:

"Can you not lead the troops to the place where my son is now confined, sir?"

"I cannot, noble emperor, as I was blindfolded before entering the place, and on leaving it as well."

"Where did the traitors set you free?"

"At the very point where we were assaulted, sire."

"Where is the communication from the leader of the traitors mentioned here?"

The young man drew another sealed document from his pocket and handed it to the emperor, saying:

"Here it is, sir."

Nicholas tore open the document and read it carefully, frowning with rage the while.

"Did you see my son before leaving the den of the traitors?"

"I did, sire."

"What did he say to you?"

"He requested you to weigh the propositions over carefully, as he is convinced that the traitors will put their threats in force if you do not consent to the demands made on you, sire."

"Are you aware that your father's name is mentioned in this treacherous document among others whose release is demanded?"

"I was not, sir."

An officer entered the apartment at the moment, and bowed to the emperor before he addressed him, saying:

"Sire, the chief of police desires to see you on the instant on important business."

"Lead him in here at once, then."

The chief of police entered the room soon after, followed by Detective Ulric.

The emperor was still holding the two documents in his hand as he addressed the chief of police, crying:

"What is it now, chief?"

"I accuse that young gentleman of being a traitor and in league with the band known as the Seven White Bears. Detective Ulric is the witness against him, and he can prove him to be in league with the White Bears."

The emperor frowned at the young man in a terrible manner, and he then drew the chief of police and his assistant aside and conversed with them for some moments in very subdued but earnest tones.

Nicholas then turned on the young count again, and addressed the chief of police as he cried:

"Arrest the young traitor on the instant, as I do believe now that he is one of the vile wretches known as the Seven White Bears."

The chief and Detective Ulric sprang on the young man on the instant, while a dozen of the guards dashed into the apartment at the same time.

The brave young fellow saw that resistance was out of the question and he surrendered, crying:

"Nicholas of Russia, I warn you that your favorite son will be put to death one hour after midnight if I am not sent back with you to your home."

The emperor was about to make an indignant reply, when a loud voice rang out through the apartment, crying:

"Beware, tyrant emperor, as your own life is in danger also, if that young man is not sent back to those who hold your fate in their hands!"

After staring around for a few moments, Nicholas turned to the chief of police, crying:

"The traitors invest our own palace, and you must root them out at once."

The warning voice then rang out again, crying:

"Nicholas of Russia, you have not the power to detect or to silence those who now threaten you. Do justice to your subjects, or you and all your sons will be put to death!"

The utmost amazement appeared on the faces of all present, but the chief of police was the first to recover his self-possession, and he turned and whispered to the emperor, saying:

"Sire, may I advise you at this critical moment?"

"What advice do you give?"

"Release that young traitor, and we will have him pursued and watched."

"But what reply can I send to those traitors through him?" inquired the tyrant, who, was in a very perplexed state of mind at the time.

"Promise all they require, but you are not bound to keep faith with traitors."

Nicholas nodded in approval and then turned to the young prisoner, saying:

"I must humble myself in order to save the life of my dear son."

Then out rang that loud voice again, crying:

"Nicholas of Russia, do not play the hypocrite, as your lies will not avail you now. No matter what promises you make to him, your son will not be released until you comply with the demands made on you by the patriotic band known as the Seven White Bears."

The tyrant turned at once and gave orders to the chief and his soldiers for searching the apartments around, and he then drove the young nobleman into the private apartment.

It is not necessary to record what then passed between the emperor and the brave young man.

Less than five minutes after, Count Torloff rode away from the palace in the direction of the place where the sleigh had disappeared that night.

When the young man rode Detective Ulric and Captain Orloff, and after them appeared a party of over a hundred mounted soldiers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SEARCH FOR THE WHITE BEARS.

It was long after midnight when Detective Ulric and Captain Orloff returned to the palace to report to the miserable emperor.

Both of the officers were compelled to confess that they were again misled by the White Bears, and that the young count

suddenly disappeared from their sight on reaching the spot where the sleigh had been attacked.

The perplexed emperor upbraided his servants, and threatened to punish them in the severest manner if they did not succeed in rescuing his son before morning.

The chief of police was also commanded, under pain of exile to Siberia, to discover the hiding place of the traitors and to rescue the young prince.

During three days and three nights the secret police of the city sought for the young prince, but they could not discover a single trace of him.

The emperor became almost frantic with rage and grief, as he had received warnings and threats in the meantime.

On the fourth evening after the capture of his son, Nicholas strode out from his palace, accompanied by Captain Orloff, and walked down toward the bank of the river, with an escort of his guards some fifty yards behind him.

The miserable man conversed with Captain Orloff in familiar tones, saying:

"You perceive now that I cannot promote you, dear as you are to me, after the disgrace attending your services of late."

"I know it, sire, but in the coming war I hope to wipe away the stain on my name, and I swear to you that I will yet rescue your noble son."

"Have you discovered any new clews, then, Orloff?"

"I have discovered the retreat of the woman whom I believe to be the leader of the band known as the Seven White Bears."

"Then why did you not have her arrested at once?"

"Because that would not serve our purpose, sire, and I have a request to make of you regarding her."

"What is that?"

"You must know, sire, that I loved this lady when I first met her over a year ago, and she then repulsed me with scorn. Her father also insulted me, and I had him arrested and put to death as a traitor who was in league with your enemy."

"I remember about that."

The young officer sighed a little, and then went on, saying:

"I have a confession to make to you, sire."

"Proceed with it, then."

"On a certain night I met the lady I loved near her home on the bank of a deep river. I offered her my hand in marriage again, and she repulsed me with more scorn than before."

"Then why did you not bear her away and force her to become your bride, you young fool."

"Because I was mad with rage, sire, and when she repulsed me I seized her and flung her into the deep and strong current. She was borne down for some distance, and I sprang in to her rescue too late, as I then believed."

"Then you believed that you had killed her?"

"That was my belief, sire, until I discovered that she was alive and the leader of those who have now captured your noble son."

"Then we must arrest the wretch at once, and force her to give up my son."

"That is my purpose, sire, but I crave permission of you to have the young lady pardoned on condition that she will become my wife."

"That is a strange request, my son, and she must be a charming creature indeed."

"She is a charming creature, but she is terrible in her wrath. She hates me and she hates you on account of the death of her father, and I sometimes fear that I can never win her to be my bride."

"And you never can," cried a loud voice from under the bank of the river on which they were walking.

Then up from under the bank sprang seven white figures, the same voices crying:

"Away with him now, brave Bears, and this will be our last and the boldest stroke of all."

Before either the emperor or Captain Orloff could draw a weapon, the Seven White Bears sprang at them and dragged them down to the frozen river.

When the soldiers reached the bank of the river they could perceive nine horsemen galloping down on the ice, and they knew that their emperor was being borne away as a prisoner.

Prince Alexander was seated in the damp apartment of the old building on that eventful night, and young Count Torloff was seated beside him.

"And so you think, Torloff," said the young prince, "that the emperor will not relent."

Before the young count could answer, a door was flung open, and the emperor and Captain Orloff were forced into the apartment by the Seven White Bears.

Nicholas was bound and gagged at the time, and so was his companion.

Forcing the two prisoners to seats the leader of the Bears addressed them, crying:

"Prisoners, you now perceive you are in the power of the White Bears, and I swear to you that you will be put to death if the emperor there does not grant all the demands made on him. Remove the gags from their mouths."

When Nicholas had power to speak he turned to his son, crying:

"My beloved son, I now see that you are in the power of daring traitors."

"Yes, and he will die before your eyes," cried the leader of the Bears, "if you do not grant all the demands made on you."

"Grant them, father," pleaded Alexander, "as I have learned to believe that they are only just."

The leader of the White Bears placed a document before Nicholas on the instant and cried: "Then sign!"

The stubborn man hesitated again when the pen was placed in his hand, and his son appealed to him, saying:

"I am now convinced, sire, that you will not prosper in the war before you if you do not grant the concessions demanded by those who hold us in their power."

Being thus appealed to, Nicholas glanced over the document presented to him, and then signed his name as he cried:

"Will you release us now?"

"Not until you punish that wretch who sits beside you," cried the leader of the wolves, as he pointed to Captain Orloff.

As the brave young woman spoke, she flung aside the bearish disguise from her beautiful face and advanced toward the wretch, crying:

"Captain Orloff, you now behold the young woman you tried to murder over a poor man. You also caused my father to be put to death here by the emperor, because he sought to discover you and punish you for the crime. You were guilty of his death, and I demand your punishment."

"I am in your power, Ruth, and you can punish me as you please."

"I know the secret of this young man's birth. I will not punish him now, but I will set him free some days hence, and he will live to expiate his crime by dying as a common soldier while fighting for his country. It will be only on that condition that he will be set free."

"I accept the condition," growled the mortified young officer.

At the breaking up of the winter camp the armies of Russia were marching against the Turks and their allies.

Captain Orloff went to the war and was crippled in the first battle.

On the morning of the fourth day after the capture of the emperor the Seven Bears and their friends assembled in the

old house on the bank of the river, and the leader of the band addressed the others, saying:

"Brave brothers, we have accomplished our mission, and the Band of Fate will now disband as the Seven White Bears until the war is over. If we all survive at that time, and if it is necessary to form again, we will renew our work for the regeneration of Russia."

A murmur of applause arose from the Bears and their friends, and the old doctor then arose, saying:

"My brave friends, I deem it necessary to tell you that I have concluded to leave the country with Count Metski and his daughter. Notwithstanding the promises of the emperor, we feel that our lives would be in peril if we remained here, and we have concluded to go to that free land known as America."

Count Metski then arose, saying:

"My brave rescuers, I wish to inform you that my son Conrad here will serve in the war with his brave companions, and that he then hopes to hasten to America to us and wed this noble young lady from that country."

On the following day the old doctor and his friends journeyed down to the Gulf of Finland, where they set sail in a vessel bound for New York.

Three days after, six of the White Bears marched away to the seat of war, and three of them were killed in the great struggle that ensued in the Crimea.

Old Peter, the guide, remained in St. Petersburg with Ruth Jones.

That brave young woman deemed it wise to disguise herself while living so near those whom she had defeated, and her faithful old companion was never suspected of being connected with the White Bears.

Students of history are aware that the great Crimea war was ended by the taking of Sebastopol by the French and English armies.

Nicholas of Russia died soon after the close of the war.

Soon after ascending that throne Alexander issued a proclamation that all the serfs in Russia would be free men thereafter.

The young emperor ruled over Russia for some time with apparent leniency and justice to his subjects, but the famous Nihilists denounced him as a tyrant in after years, and he was assassinated by the members of that band.

The brave young hero known as Don survived the war, and he then hastened to America to wed Constance Metski, and to reside there with his bride.

Conrad Metski also survived the great battles in the Crimea, and he sought a bride in the western land also, where Blanche Dearing awaited him.

The Cossack chief fell in one of the battles on the Danube, and it must be confessed that Ruth Jones did not deplore him very much.

While Ruth has passed through many daring adventures in her lifetime, she often turns to her faithful old friend Peter and exclaims:

"Oh, Peter, we have faithful workers in Russia now, but none of them can compare with the Seven White Bears."

THE END.

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